The Vessel

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/8118928.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	M/M, Multi
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford & Will Graham, Jack Crawford/Will Graham, Jack Crawford/Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Alternate Universe - Slavery, Sexual Slavery, Ritual Sex, Drug-Induced Sex, Ritual Drug USe, Dubious Consent, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Age Difference, Young Will Graham, Master/Servant, Bloodletting, Coming Untouched, Threesome - M/M/M, Worldbuilding, Fictional Religion & Theology, Hannibal is an unlikely emancipator, very much a hannigram fic despite the pairings, Slow Burn, Wendigo porn, Gaslighting, Manipulation, Needles, Canon-Typical Violence, Will suffers beautifully, hurt/comfort of a very Hannibal kind, Memory Palace, Tension, Murder Husbands, Sort Of, Angst and Feels, Jannigram, Illustrated
Language:	English
Collections:	#NovemberAmnesty
Stats:	Published: 2016-09-23 Completed: 2016-11-26 Words: 43,468 Chapters: 14/14

The Vessel

by Weconqueratdawn

Summary

Will is both a slave and an exalted religious symbol of the Temple, occupying the highest position he is able to. In a few months, he hopes to start his new life with the blessing of the Father (Jack), and until then lives a life of relative comfort. But when a mysterious Seer (Hannibal) arrives to cast doubt upon his future, his choices might have to change...

Basically, a naughty romp which has turned into a legit AU. More info on the tags to be found in the author's note at the beginning.

He made his way slowly to his eventual destination - the one all paths in the garden led to - a sundial in the very centre. It was small in stature, adorned with garlands of fresh thyme and cornered with four stone supplicants. Like the Vessel, it was central to the teachings of the Temple - emblematic of the four facets of life experienced by all and imbued with an everyday, pragmatic significance. Inscribed around the dial, ran the Vessel's Creed, the only words he was permitted to speak aloud in the Temple, at the start of each Sufferance.

"My sufferance is borne for the good of all, and in this I willingly submit."

Notes

Written for theseavoice's birthday, who asked for a slave AU with Will/Hannibal/Jack. I hope this satisfies, because it has spiralled into something much bigger than I anticipated! :)

I'm writing this slightly on the hoof, but there will be about 10 (I think), updated regularly.

Huge thanks to my lordofthelesbians and wraithsonwings for beta, and also to em_c_writes for helping me think this one through - it was *incredibly* useful.

Important note on the tags:
In this fic, Will is a slave (although one with a lot of freedoms) and exists in a community where slavery is an accepted and normalised part of life. The sex in this fic does not happen under duress or violence and Will consents as much as he able, given his circumstances. During some of it he is under the influence of drugs, and for some of it he consents because of cultural norms - I would class these contexts as dub-con. In the past, he has been required to perform sexual acts for who he has served and it is discussed throughout the fic. This is shown as a perfectly normal request and there is little/no stigma attached to him because of it. Though again, he appears to have consented as much as he can, this is still sexual slavery so this is the non-con mention the tag refers to.

Finally, Will is a young adult throughout the duration of this fic, and will be released from his service at the age of 21.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

After the cool stones of the Temple, the sun outside beat down remorselessly. The heat licked round Will's bare limbs and he shaded his eyes from its blinding brightness. In high summer it was frequently complained of - especially by those not compelled to work outside in it - but Will found it pleasing in short bursts. Its relentless strength was near tangible, a firm and inescapable stroke of sensation over the skin.

The garden he walked in was private to the Temple and only for the use of its most important inhabitants. The hour of his exercise was well-known and, by custom rather than by strict ordinance, he would likely meet no one. It was not the correct thing to associate with the Vessel outside of the proper channels and without the presence of the Father. If anyone happened into the garden, they would nod in acknowledgement and pass on without speaking, which suited Will just fine. The strangled mix of superiority and deference he inspired in others tried his patience more that he should admit.

High walls surrounded the garden, ensuring a privacy fitting for a space of contemplation. Here the Priests and their novice assistants could wander the narrow paths, meditating upon the careful design, and refreshing themselves under the shade of the vines. Will walked out among the herbs, spices and aromatics which were nurtured in neat arrangements for use both in the Temple and in the kitchens. Such plants were rare outside of Temple settlements, collected over a number of years by the travelling Seers. For a few short weeks each year, they were required to return to Temple life and would bring items of use or value back with them.

Plants of all kinds were highly prized, and the abilities of the gardeners to make them flourish in the hot sun placed them just below Will in the Temple hierarchy. It had been Will's skill at horticulture which brought him to the attention of the Father a few years ago. In the full heat of the day, their lively verdant fragrances rose high into the air around him. As Will walked he thought of the things he'd been taught. One day soon he would need this knowledge again. He would have land and plants of his own to be cared for.

He made his way slowly to his eventual destination - the one all paths in the garden led to - a sundial in the very centre. It was small in stature, adorned with garlands of fresh thyme and cornered with four stone supplicants. Like the Vessel, it was central to the teachings of the Temple - emblematic of the four facets of life experienced by all and imbued with an everyday, pragmatic significance. Inscribed around the dial, ran the Vessel's Creed, the only words he was permitted to speak aloud in the Temple, at the start of each Sufferance.

My sufferance is borne for the good of all, and in this I willingly submit.

As he was required to do each day, Will circled it and considered its meaning anew.

From a distance, the weekly Sufferances all merged into one endless gesture of sacred obligation, but the last had been only yesterday. The Temple would be packed with people

from the Settlement, with some even drawn down from the surrounding hills, so Will could exorcise some of their pains and help the Father keep order in the world.

Around the dial, the kneeling supplicants represented in turn sorrow, toil, pain and pleasure - the cornerstones of the Sufferance. One wept, face covered by his hands; one dripped with sweat and held a scythe, one hand to his brow; one bled from wounds at his wrists and chest; the last ejaculated, hands bound and untouched.

*

Silence lay thick over the stones, and the congregation shuffles distantly behind him. On his knees, Will reads the offerings they have brought him - their sorrows and trials, their secret fears and hopes. Each is spoken only in his mind, and each scrap of paper is burnt at the candle before him. It takes time and he must concentrate, absorbing each one, taking them deep within himself. Some of the papers are in the same hand - that of the Temple scribe for those who are unlettered, through injury or poverty. A few are written in large and tremulous letters - Will finds he weeps most easily for these. They carry more than their words and pitiful language. They emanate straight from the sufferer, transferred directly to Will through the paper.

He weeps for them. For everyone.

The cup is bitter and he must drink.

He is used to the nausea now - it comes first and passes quickly. He sits before the Father while the Words are spoken, waiting for the fever to grip him. Will knows them by heart but they grow muffled and distant, as his head clouds and his ears ring. The flickering shadows at the edge of the lantern-light grow solid, and begin to move across his vision. They approach him - fantastical and unreal creatures, things which walk on two legs but are crowned with antlers and bone. As they draw close, he reaches out his hand to touch.

The fever burns him with shivers. His eyes close. He must sweat it out and then he will be cleansed. His tunic will become as sodden as if worked in the fields all day. When the Father is ready, it will be stripped from him and discarded.

The Father's hand is heavy on his head. It grounds him to what is real and he clings to it.

The bleeding is the easiest part to bear. The knife is sharp and clean, and the amount of blood required is small. He remains on his knees, blindfolded before the congregation. The Father stands behind him, knife pressed to his neck while he Speaks, but this is not where he will be cut.

When it comes, it is swift. The Father finishes the utterances and slices a steady line over Will's heart and across each wrist. He is practiced - the wounds are light and so shallow they will clot in a matter of minutes.

In the meantime, Will bleeds and with the redness of his blood pain itself is released from all watching.

By the final act, he is weary and faces his most difficult trial. Without this final stage, the others are meaningless, beyond worthless. He must demonstrate transcendence is both possible and desirable; that there is hope, enjoyment, pleasure. He will complete the release of the congregation's woes and burdens.

He is naked now, knees to the floor, hands tied behind him. The blood has dried sticky on his skin. Attendants wash him with soft cloths - all traces of sorrow, toil and pain are wiped away.

Visions still linger at the corner of his mind and the dark shadows take on pleasing supple shapes, surrounding him. Their touch is almost real, gentle and stroking over his skin, until he is at a stand. They grow rougher, and more forceful - he must imagine himself overwhelmed - until he feels his fluids drip wet along his length. Sometimes the antlered creature crouches just behind him, and he can feel its breath over his cheek. Then, with careful control of his breathing and musculature, his chest will heave and his moans will ring out until, at last, his ejaculate spurts forth, onto the ground before him.

The Father blesses the congregation, and with joy they sing.

*

The tall wooden gate into the garden creaked loudly, interrupting Will's train of thought. From where he stood behind the sundial, he observed someone enter. A stranger, tall and broad-shouldered and who moved with a lithe and measured grace. Judging by his appearance - practical and weathered, with smears of dark paint daubed over his face - he was another visiting Seer. The last had departed a few months ago - an uninteresting and self-important man who had spent too long with only his own opinions for company. He had failed to impress either Will or the Father, and had left with some bitterness.

Will retreated quickly into the shadows of the hanging vines, his tread soft along the packed-earth paths, silent and unseen. He relished the seclusion of his walks and just then had no use for the pleasantries or deference he must display in the presence of a Seer. Whatever facile or empty ideas they might have grown in the desert or mountains, they were still holy persons and must be treated as such. Tonight the Father would call a dinner in the Seer's honour, and Will would have ample opportunity to demonstrate his respect then. With these justifications, Will slid between the vines and the bordering wall and let the shade there swallow him up.

The man approached the dial and circled it, as Will had done. His expression was closed, perhaps a habit of meditation and solitude. Finally he halted, and turned aside to the thyme bushes, growing abundantly nearby. With a knife from his pocket he cut several trailing sprigs and settled deliberately onto the dusty floor to weave them into a garland. In this attitude, he was mostly hidden from Will. All except for his tanned face, lined from the sun, and his silvery-bronze hair, long and tied neatly back from his face.

Will sighed inwardly, and was glad he had hidden himself away. The dial was a focus for reflection, not a shrine, the Vessel having no power of his own to wield. But on occasion there were some who thought they could address him directly and hope he would pay special attention to their ills. Perhaps this Seer had similarly strange ideas, and might wish to claim Will's attention and explain to him his no doubt especially interesting thoughts.

He watched as the Seer placed his wreath on the dial. His voice was accented when he spoke, saying, "May you become as you should."

Then he turned on his heel, and left the garden on long strides.

Once the tall gates had swung shut, Will stepped out from behind the vines. The wreath sat on top of the others, a neat circle of tiny green leaves. Before he followed the Seer's path to the gates, Will crushed a few of the resinous leaves between his fingers, scenting them with the fresh fragrance of thyme.

Chapter 2

As another's presence had invaded the privacy of the garden, the cool of his cell now seemed preferable. It was a few short steps from the gates to the Temple Quarters. Adjoining it was the Temple itself, a large square solid building with sides which sloped gently inwards to a flat roof, high above the ground. From the inside, its space seemed dark and vast, the smooth stone walls seeming to close in above Will's head. Attached to the Temple, but distinct from it, was the Settlement - a collection of maybe fifty dwellings with a little market square. Outside that were the Walls, and beyond them, the fields for tilling and grazing, and then eventually the distant blue hills.

Will rarely went beyond the Temple Walls, and was not frequently seen in the Settlement either. Although technically his freedom of movement was not restricted, within the Walls at least, he had to exercise caution. It would not do for him to wander in places where he had no business to be, on his own and not accompanying the Father. To the people of the Settlement he was the Vessel and he must act suitably. If he did not, how could they trust in him to perform the Sufferance well? Weekly they brought their most secret, innermost thoughts to him and asked for his aid - he could not fail them and he could not forget his place as Vessel.

Within the Quarters, Will's cell was at the end of a long corridor. It was set apart from the Priests' apartments and slave quarters, but close to the Father's private rooms. It was small, with a window high up by the ceiling, barred with iron, but precious to him all the same. After all, it was far more than most of his kind could ever hope for.

Inside it was a straw mattress set upon a low frame, a rickety chair and a cupboard for his clothing. Leaning against the plaster wall was a cracked mirror, and on the chair rested a single cup and plate. His clothes were simply and modestly decorated but made of good cloth and nicely stitched. They fitted him well - mainly tunics which corded tight around his waist and displayed his youthful limbs as much as was appropriate. He had sandals of braided leather and leather bands to cover the marks around his wrists.

In addition to these, Will had a few small secrets tucked into the straw of the mattress. A collection of found objects he liked to look at sometimes - a polished stone, a bird's skull, a dropped bead of glass from a necklace. Sometimes he felt they were childish whims and wondered if he should quietly discard them. It would be easy enough - no one else would look at them twice. Except maybe another slave, of course.

There was a pitcher of water waiting for him on the floor, a little earlier in the day than usual. And there was a note on the bed, alerting him to the dinner he had already anticipated for the Seer. It would be formal and his presence symbolic only. He would sit at the Father's side and be present as the Vessel, the tool through which the community was set free from its collective pain. He had no time for solitude now, and must wash and dress immediately, before attending to the Father.

He chose a clean tunic, his best, with a double line of blue stitching around the neck. His hair was combed carefully, for the breeze in the garden had made it unruly. Finally, he anointed

his neck with fragrant oil and straightened the pendant he wore always. It was heavy, brass and marked him as belonging to the Father.

Then he set out down the long corridor for the Father's private apartments.

*

Fifteen years ago he had been taken from a land distant, one reputed for the wisdom of its elders and the comeliness of its youth. Several of the slaves who worked in the fields or laboured in the quarries originated from the same place. To be assigned to the Temple, as Will had been as a small boy, had been lucky, for the work was lighter and less harsh. Those with promise might also be tutored, in necessary things. The opportunity to learn reading and writing, the proper way to serve the higher classes, and useful things such as care of plants and livestock, was extremely advantageous. Only men could enter Temple life and, watching the women in the laundries or out in the fields, Will frequently felt how fortunate he had been.

Will had shown promise in the gardens and with the livestock, and had been assigned to both for several years. His skills had caused the Father to notice him, and he had recommended Will should move to serve within the sacred space of the Temple itself. He learned to prepare the oils and unguents, to light the lamps, and to serve the Priests. He brought them food and drink, laundered their robes and assisted them however they wished. They had many and varied needs, and the slaves would see to them all.

The Vessel must be a young man, and after he came of age would need to pass his duties over to another. Will had been serving in the Temple when the time had come for a new Vessel to be chosen. The decision would be made during a special ceremony, conducted privately in the Temple, with only an audience of Priests and the Father. There were a dozen candidates, all prized for their obedience and manner, and Will was selected to be amongst their number. The role was a worthy one, the highest position any of them could obtain and, in addition, would guarantee their freedom after they too came of age.

Unclothed, the candidates were lined up, and there followed an arduous process of inspection and discussion by the Priests, interspersed with bouts of prayer and reflection. There were many things to consider. The Vessel must be trustworthy, must inspire the congregation and, most importantly, must be able perform satisfactorily. It was tiring to stand for so long and be looked upon, and sometimes touched, while the Priests talked amongst themselves. Sometimes they asked a candidate a question, but mostly there was nothing to do but wait.

It was the Father who would make the final choice, however. Though free from official obligations towards all others, during his tenure the Vessel would be bound to him as his personal slave. No one else would be trusted to serve the Father, and the Vessel would become his property and benefit from his protection.

Immediately, Will had felt the Father’s inclination to choose him. He was watched, carefully, while the Priests asked their questions. One Priest he served had been quite anxious to retain Will for his own ends, and had done what he could to throw doubt on his abilities to perform correctly. *Very pleasing to look upon,* had been the suggestion, *but a little wayward for this important office and in need of a firm hand.* Will had found it extremely trying to stay silent

and begun to fear it would have its intended effect of provoking him. The Priest in question had never been required to show a firm hand and, in any case, Will was sceptical he had the strength of character needed for such a thing. Will's duties had been performed impeccably, much to the Priest's obvious pleasure, and Will only just prevented himself from saying so.

He was afraid, however, that the Father noticed his agitation. His eyes became fixed upon him and Will tried to cast his own downwards, as he should do in his presence. The evidence of his own nakedness was undeniable then, the smooth pale planes of his chest and belly shadowed in the dim light. His hardness was waning under his anger at the Priest's words, and fear of the Father's disapproval was not helping either. So Will did not expect the Father's sudden, thunderous chastening of the Priest for speaking out of turn, and it still rang in Will's ears when he thought of it. All the candidates had jumped, the sound echoing round the hushed Temple. It had thrilled something through Will, but the Priests were made nervous by it which only served to make the Father impatient with them. After this, they were all gruffly dismissed to spectate from a distance.

Slowly, the Father had walked down the line, looking each candidate over carefully. When he reached Will, it was the closest he had been allowed to the Father before, and Will couldn't help look back just as curiously. He was a large man of about forty, powerfully built, and with a stately but practical bearing. His dark eyes were stern and unflinching but there was a rough kindness there too. He asked Will to step forward and studied every inch of him, while Will blushed furiously. Then, he had been unused to the public display of his nakedness, though not unwilling to undergo it. The Father's gaze prickled over his skin and to his mingled shame and excitement, he grew stiffer beneath it.

"The plants that you cared for in the garden," the Father said, after a time. "Why did they respond so well to you?"

Will had tried to answer honestly. "I listened to them. To what they needed. And then I gave it to them."

One of the Priests, hidden in shadows, snorted loudly. The Father had turned his head only, still directly in front of Will, and bellowed, "LEAVE NOW. I will speak with you later."

It rumbled through Will and, to his further humiliation, caused his hardness to twitch up against his stomach.

The Father turned back to Will, stepping backwards appraisingly. He smiled, nodding.

"Very good, Will," he said, and then over his shoulder. "Dismiss the rest."

Then he had bade Will to kneel and declared him Chosen. Will would have a short apprenticeship under the former Vessel, to be taught to perform his new duties. Soon he would almost not be a slave at all, anymore.

*

Will passed by the guards at the entrance to the Father's private apartment without speaking to them. He could enter whenever he wished and it was not their business to interfere in the

Father's personal matters.

Beyond the main doorway was a long hall, and leading off it the Father had many rooms. Some for receiving official guests, some for quiet reflection, and some strictly private. He made straight for the last - no one but Will was welcome here. He knocked twice on the door and waited for the instruction to enter. When it came, the Father's raised voice reached Will's ears easily through the heavy, wooden door, and he turned the handle to step inside.

The room behind it was furnished comfortably, with a cushioned couch and a low daybed. There was a window overlooking the gardens, partially open, and the air which blew in was sweet and fresh. On either side of the room were two doors, facing each other. One led to the Father's bedroom and one to a private washroom, the only one in the Quarters. Will followed the Father's voice into the bedroom, to find him reading at a table by another window. He looked up as Will came to stand at his side.

"Will, good. We have another visitor."

"I received your note," Will said. "Will he be staying long, do you think?"

"For once, I hope so," the Father said. "This one has far more sense than most Seers. I knew him a long time ago."

"Then he must be better than the last," smiled Will.

The Father laughed heartily, long and loud. "There couldn't be many much worse, though I cannot say so outside this room."

Will said no more, instead moving to the closets where the Father's robes were kept. Tonight he would wear his most impressive ones, a deep purple with a white border, kept for formal occasions such as this. They had been cleaned recently and Will had pressed them to crispness then, but he would do that again regardless. They were be perfect and he would be proud to take his place at the Father's side.

With the robes prepared, Will waited outside the bedroom as the Father dressed. To Will's surprise, the Father had been very specific about what he required and absolutely did not require from Will, and anything of an intimate nature had been declined. The Priests had routinely taken this as their due, up to and including the most personal kind of service a slave could offer, especially a pretty one. But Will was not disappointed by this - it could be a terrible chore to remain late at night in a Priest's apartment, and missed sleep was very difficult to catch up on.

He had reflected that perhaps the Father had chosen so to avoid interference with his duties as Vessel. He was utterly forbidden from experiencing sexual release of any kind outside of the Temple - his body, in this way, belonged to the gods and by extension, to the Father. It was different for the ordinary Temple slaves - of course, no one thought much about their pleasure but they were not forbidden from experiencing it, as long as it did not disrupt their work. The only intimate contact that Will had with the Father - indeed, with anyone - happened during the Temple rites.

The weekly Sufferances were not the end of Will's Temple duties - there were other rites, far more private ones, held only between the holy men of the Temple and the gods. For Will was the Vessel of much more than just the sufferings of their community. He could also be a conduit for ecstatic worship, a Vessel for veneration and rejoicing. These rites happened less frequently, on days dedicated to specific gods. Sometimes the moon would be in a certain position relating to the sun or would rise over a specific hill, and the Astronomer would tell the Father to give the orders for another God's Day. The preparations could take days - afterwards there would be feasting and music and this took time to prepare. In the lead up to the rites, Will would need to fast and pray and take cleansing medicines.

The Vessel through which the gods were exalted must be pure, else all was for naught.

Chapter 3

Dinner was served in the long hall, and the Father entered last of all. Will preceded, announcing him to the assembled company and holding the door as he walked through. In front of them lay a grand and opulent table stretching the length of the room. Around it had been seated about two dozen people, all the Priests, the Astronomer, the Gardener, and the Overseer from the Settlement, and all now standing to welcome the Father.

He took his place at the head of the table, and Will sat down at his left hand. The guests bowed their respect, then took up both their seats and their interrupted conversations again. The Father intensely disliked unnecessary ceremony, and immediately joined in with the discussion between the Overseer on his right and the Priest adjacent. There would be a formal welcome and pretty speeches to be made later, but first they would eat and talk business.

With half an ear, Will listened in. The drainage in the fields was an issue again, apparently, plus some of the buildings were starting to show wear. No one would address him, or acknowledge him beyond a small nod and a swift avoidance of eye contact, so he had no one to converse with himself. He looked at his empty plate instead. The servers had yet to begin bringing out the main dishes and though the table was laden with bread and fruits, it was not his place to select any for himself. The Father would serve him, when he had finished speaking.

While he waited, he looked down the parallel line of faces until his gaze reached the Seer, seated at the other end of the table. His head was turned away, speaking to the Astronomer at his side, so Will had plenty of opportunity to study him and to wonder if the Father was correct to believe him sensible. He had a careful, held-back demeanour, obviously very polite but it caused Will to question what lay beneath it. He would find out later, after the dinner, when the Father would entertain him as a welcome guest within the informality of his rooms.

In front of him, a plate of chicken legs was placed onto the table, and Will startled a little. The Father blinked at it for a second, then scooped up a couple and dropped them onto Will's plate, along with some bread and apples, before he returned to discussing damaged fencing. When Will raised his head again, the Seer was looking straight at him and Will could only stare back, dumbfounded.

He had grown used to everyone pretending he was invisible. There was no need for him to use or develop social graces, beyond being quiet, obedient and modestly well-presented. His office as Vessel was important but that he should exist as a person too seemed to be an embarrassing inconvenience to some. When the Seer did not look away, Will's anger began to rise. *Does he not know how rude he is being?* he thought. *What if the Father should see?* But Will knew that the Father would likely not notice, and if he did, would not care particularly. Looking was not prohibited; it was merely that people had nothing to say to him.

Will tried to focus on his food, but the Seer continued to watch him as he took bites of his own. Heat flushed Will's face even as he valiantly made to ignore the Seer. But it was so difficult, when every time he glanced up their eyes would meet again, until Will began to

wonder why he was so easy to ignore when the Seer wasn't. His gaze was not challenging and it did not seem to threaten either. It was simply a relentless onslaught of puzzled curiosity, until Will could nearly feel it penetrating underneath his skin. He was left feeling almost chastened, as if he were the one acting out of turn.

Then one of the Priests tapped the Seer on the arm and, just like that, he turned away. Will was forgotten and his attention was claimed elsewhere.

Relieved, Will continued with the business of eating. The Seer did not look at him again, not even during his speech of thanks. And if Will still rankled over his attention, it was not because of its absence.

*

Will did not pay any mind to the speeches - they always followed the same formula and he had heard them many times before. The Father would thank all for attending and then welcome the esteemed visitor to the Temple and to the Settlement. He trusted that all would be pleased to learn from the Seer's deep knowledge and insights into the world beyond, and extended every hospitality which could be offered to him. And the Seer would respond with a great magnanimousness of manner which would sit squarely at odds with the humble words of thanks he expressed in return. All in all, it was very dull and very insincere.

After this, the company broke up. Most would go back to their apartments, maybe after a cool evening stroll in the gardens. The Seer, the Overseer and the most highly regarded Priests, were invited to join the Father in his private rooms. And Will would attend them while they spoke further and more freely than they could at the dinner.

By the time they had reached the spacious room set aside for entertaining, Will had composed his irritated nerves. The Seer's behaviour had been strange but he determined to do his best by the Father. He served drinks and sweetmeats flawlessly, and when not needed knelt silently at the Father's feet. Though Will paid careful attention to the Seer, noting his evenly pitched voice and his deliberate phrasing, he avoided looking at his person almost entirely. He was the very model of a Vessel and glowed with pride when the Father asked for his opinion on the keeping of livestock. Will would show the Seer what he was worth and how he should be treated.

The Seer dominated the evening's conversation without seeming to, and the other guests were enthralled with his tales and wise insights. The Father obviously enjoyed his company greatly, and there had been much laughter and talk of the time they had served as novices together. Privately, Will knew he thought Seers were mostly impractical creatures, with little idea of the problems of looking after a community and its welfare. But here, the Father's opinion was plainly very different and Will suspected the Seer would remain at the Temple for far longer than the last.

At the end of the long evening, he shouldn't have been so surprised when the Father offered Will's assistance during the course of the Seer's stay. He listened with growing hesitancy as the Father proclaimed to the Seer that Will was the finest Vessel he had known, capable and dutiful in equal measure, and would do everything he could to make him comfortable at the Temple.

In fact, it was perfectly normal for him to serve the Seer, and Will should have expected it. Yet somehow the Seer had cast an air around himself of self-sufficiency and difference - to Will it seemed unthinkable that he should have the ordinary needs of men. He watched as the Seer accepted the offer graciously, glancing only once at Will as he did so. And then somehow Will was not thinking of laundering his linens and stabling his horse, but of other needs men might have, ones which he had not satisfied for some time.

Blushing violently, he kept his eyes on the floor by his knees. No one had asked that of him since he became Vessel, even the other visiting Seers. Somehow the Father had precluded the possibility in his loan of Will and they had dared not go against his wishes, even when it was clear they had wanted to. But Will judged that this Seer was different, no matter how polite and respectful he was to the Father. The stares he had received over dinner were fresh in his mind, and Will could not think how else to interpret them.

*

When the final guest had departed, and Will had ensured the Father was comfortable for the night, he made the journey down the twisting, dark corridors to the Seer's room. It was deep into the evening and the lamps had been extinguished, so he carried one with him to light the way. The Temple Quarters had been added to over many years, as the needs of the Temple had expanded, so they did not always follow a logical plan. In fact, it was easy for newcomers to become lost, and end up in the storerooms when they actually sought the bath house.

Seers were always assigned to a dedicated room on the opposite side of the building, just beyond the branching corridor down which the Priests' apartments were to be found. It was considered to be a very hospitable room, one suitable for important guests, close to the bath house and far from the noise of the kitchens and laundry. There was a comfortable bed with a view over the gardens, and was particularly pleasant on sunny mornings. Arriving outside, Will knocked upon the door and awaited admittance.

Instead of a call to enter, the Seer opened the door himself, and Will stepped back in surprise. The Seer beheld him calmly and did not move from the threshold. He was barefoot on the rush-strewn stone floor, and wore his clothes from earlier. They were far less travel-worn than the ones Will had seen in the garden - a loose shirt, very white and made from a cloth so fine it was almost gauzy, with black breeches. He had removed his boots and black cloak already, but the dark smears of grease around his eyes and over his cheeks remained.

Will collected himself, tired of being made to feel uneasy. "I have brought you more drinking water," he said, holding aloft the earthen jug. "This room is some way from the kitchens, and sometimes the slaves cannot carry enough with them on their rounds."

The Seer did not speak, only inclined his head in mute invitation and returned inside his room. Will set it on the table next to the bed, and was pleased to see he'd been correct. The jug delivered earlier was only half full.

Then he took a steadying breath, and said, "How else can I serve you this evening?" The words came out formally polite and with no trace of a questioning waver, and Will was pleased by how he'd manage to deport himself.

The Seer watched him consideringly from the other side of the room, before he finally spoke. “You have done very well, so far. It seems the Father is lucky to have you.” He paused, and wet his lips. “My horse has been stabled already but I would like you to ensure her comfort personally while I remain here. She can be highly-strung sometimes, but after everything I have heard about you I am sure you will manage her competently.”

Will nodded his assent. Looking after animals was his favourite task, so he knew this would cause him no difficulties. “Of course, I shall see to her as you wish.”

He waited for any further instruction, but none came. Instead, the Seer poured some water for washing into the basin and unbuttoned his shirt. Will was forced to remain while the Seer cupped his hands with water and doused his face, scrubbing at the streaks of grease. It spread, darkening his face unnaturally, before he wiped it away with a rough piece of old cloth. Without it, his skin seemed finer and his short beard was striped with silver.

When he was finished, he said, “Return in the morning, early. Bring bread and more water, and there will be laundering for you then. Go now, and sleep well.”

Then he turned from Will, and Will knew he had been dismissed.

Back in his cell, Will pondered the Seer’s words briefly before he did as he was bid and slept dreamlessly.

Chapter 4

Fourteen nights had passed and still the Seer asked for no more than he might from a common servant. It was a relief and a perplexity in equal measure, and Will could not settle his mind on the subject. On the one hand, though he did not mind such duties neither did he particularly enjoy them - indeed, he was actively prevented from doing so. But on the other, he could not understand the Seer's motivations. He had observed him at length and was more sure than ever that the Seer would have what he wanted, when he wanted it. And Will was also certain that parts of his own person were included in this category - the Seer had made no secret of his appraising glances.

Strangely enough, the Father also appeared favourable to such activities, and took it for granted that Will was already in the habit of pleasing the Seer at regular intervals. Twice now, he had made a joke of Will needing to finish his nightly duties early so as not to keep the Seer waiting. He also seemed to believe the Seer was a positive influence and a useful connection for Will to make. It was suggested that Will ask him for advice on where to settle, once his tenure as Vessel was at an end, and what crops would be best to start with. The Father had early taken a personal interest in Will's education, and now encouraged Will to seek the Seer's tuition. According to the Father, he was an expert upon the sciences, anatomy and medicine especially, and also made a study of human behaviour. Will was regularly tasked with putting such-and-such a question to him and having to report back what he had learned to the Father.

In the Father's eyes, it seemed the Seer could do no wrong, and the contrast between how the Father thought things stood and how things *actually* stood, confused Will greatly.

Though Will did not spend his time with the Seer on his knees or in earnest study, he was still subject to his intense and continual interest. Instead of being taught the medicinal uses of herbs, or how to please and satisfy his desires, the Seer would talk and expect Will to respond freely. He would ask open-ended questions, which Will was initially cautious of, unsure if he was looking to discuss Will's words with the Father later.

He asked of Will's past, what he remembered of the place he'd come from, or his family. Did he remember their faces and would he know them if he saw them again? Did he know his birth date? Was Will the name his mother had given him, or had that come later? He would ask if Will spoke to the other slaves, or if he had known any of them before they had come to the Temple. He asked about his life at the Temple, which duties he liked and which he didn't, how he felt about his role as Vessel.

The questions were without end, and Will eventually could do nothing more than answer them as best he could. He told the Seer he remembered very little of his past and his family but he was sure he would know them. But he could not say if Will was the name his mother gave him, he thought perhaps not. He replied that he had been granted a new birth date on arriving at the Temple, and that it would be unseemly for him to speak to the other slaves now. And he had known no one before he arrived here himself.

About the last question he had been adamant, however - he was very pleased to be the Vessel and to alleviate what suffering he could. The Seer had grown thoughtful and after had changed the subject.

He had by then been present for two Sufferances and, during the second, Will had caught himself wondering which sorrow had belonged to the Seer. Every attendee was required to offer one, so somewhere within Will had briefly lived something of the Seer's. He had not noticed any unusual woes - and frequently reminded himself that it was not his place to guess at their origins - but knew that the Seer's would be unusual indeed.

*

One evening, the Seer's conversation took a different turn. Will had set out his room for the evening. The Seer had not instructed in him this, but Will had noticed the manner in which he liked to keep things and took it upon himself to do this nightly. A cup of water by the bed, but the jug to be kept on the table and covered with a weighted cloth. All his papers and writing materials were arranged in neat, straight lines. His clothing was folded and put away - he had delivered several shirts, freshly washed, pressed, and with starch to stiffen the gathered cuffs. Will had also mended a small hole in a pair of breeches and had thought about offering to do the same for his travelling clothes. They were far more worn and rugged, made of leather which had softened to fit around his form, and would benefit from a visit to the tannery.

Will was cleaning the Seer's boots, on the floor with a sheet over his knees to keep his tunic clean. The Seer watched from the opposite wall. This was another odd thing about him - he would not occupy himself while Will worked, or relax on the small couch. Instead he would stand and observe, as if something interesting was happening. Will had grown used to this and it perturbed him no longer.

Then the Seer spoke, as if continuing a conversation, but if so it was not one Will had been part of.

"You and I are very similar. More similar than they know."

Will frowned and looked up, unsure how to reply, or even if a reply was wanted. The Seer seemed to expect one, judging by the long silence which followed, so Will had picked up his brush again and said, "Why, did you used to be a Vessel?" It was a very impertinent thing to say, as of course he could not have been, but Will could not quite help himself.

"Not I," the Seer said. "In all my long travels, over many years, I have never come across a former Vessel."

"What, not even once?" Will knew there could not be hundreds, but a Vessel could only serve a maximum of five years so it was very likely a traveller would stumble upon at least one.

"Not even once," the Seer said. "It seems they are to be young and lovely only, kept poised between the sacred and the profane. Never to hold any knowledge beyond the Walls and thought all the sweeter for it."

Will's frown had grown deeper and the boots lay forgotten in his lap. The Seer must either be joking or playing some irritating game of provocation with him.

"Then you can't have looked very hard," he said. "Or you did not ask the right questions to discover the answers you sought. Perhaps I would not tell every traveller I met who I had been as a young man."

"That would be a wise decision, and one I would recommend," said the Seer. "But I do not think that is the reason."

His attitude was solemn and Will did not know what to think. He wanted to ask what the Seer's reasoning for this was, but part of him was afraid of the answer. However strange the Seer might be, it dawned upon Will that he trusted him and his judgement. His demeanour seemed more honest than that of the Priests, even as it was less straightforward. But the Father had been very explicit about his hopes for Will's future, and Will knew he was an honourable man.

Will shrugged, at a loss for what else to do. The Seer must be wrong.

"Then you have simply been unlucky," he said, and went back to his task.

*

After that, Will noticed a marked difference in the Seer's attitude towards him. His curious questioning of Will halted and instead he drew him into conversations about generalities. They discussed morality and he told Will tales of people far away, who lived different lives to those in and around the Settlements.

Will would go back to his cell each night with his head full of strange images, of towering cities too big to imagine, shining white under a desert sun. Or of vast and wild forests which seemed to stretch without end, filled with creatures unknown to him, fierce and noble. He would awake from fantastical dreams and steal a few precious minutes each morning to remember them, lying in his narrow bed. He knew he should rise immediately to set about his work, but it was difficult to tear himself away from both them and the lightness which bubbled below his heart.

One morning he was even late delivering the Father's breakfast. It was only by a few minutes but Will felt the guilt of it deeply. He resolved there and then to focus on his work and put aside the distractions of the Seer's stories. They probably weren't even true, and only told to amuse himself.

The Father was greatly displeased by his delayed breakfast. He required a quiet routine in the mornings, preferring to take his breakfast alone rather than in the long hall. These few minutes of disruption had put him out of temper already and Will had to apologise very meekly and fervently. He made no excuses because what excuse could he make? To tell the Father he had been daydreaming about lands which he would never see, and were likely imaginary anyway, would only anger him further.

Instead Will waited silently outside until the Father had eaten and drunk, and his mood became more settled.

When Will was called back in, the Father said, “The Astronomer projects the next God's Day to fall in twelve day's time. After the next Sufferance you will need to prepare. I will send the Physician to you as usual.”

Will nodded and said, “Of course, Father. I will begin as soon as I can.”

The Father smiled, softening a little, and said, “I know I can rely on you to do your best.”

Will flushed a little, and busied himself with his morning's work. The sheets were to be changed today, so they must be taken to the laundry, as well as his usual tasks. It had been some weeks since the last God's Day and Will was always nervous as they approached. There was much he had to do to prepare, far more than for the Sufferances. He must make his body, mind and soul as clean and pure as possible, so he could be a fitting receptacle. At the ceremony, Will would be absent entirely and in his place there would only be light and pure joy.

“The drainage is still not right in the lower fields,” the Father said, as Will began to lay out his clothing for the day. “It is either too wet or too dry and the Overseer says he’s tried everything he knows. I'm going to see it for myself later - there needs to be a solution before winter and someone must be able to find it.”

“You will need your boots, then,” Will said, opening the Father's wardrobes to find them in case they needed polishing.

“I will, yes” the Father said. “But I was going to tell you I want you to come along. Experience of these problems will be good for you.”

Will stood clutching the Father's boots rather stupidly, until he could gather himself enough to answer.

“Thank you very much for thinking of me. I would like that greatly,” he said, ablaze with pride and pleasure.

He hardly ever stepped outside the Walls, and the sun was shining and the distant hills were wreathed in mist, and it was just like that dream he had had- But here he stopped himself short with a stern reminder of his earlier vow. The Father was going out of his way to do Will a kindness by thinking of his future. Will must do the same and learn what he could while he had the opportunity. He would be free to think of the mist in the hills soon, but first he must focus on practical matters and do well in his work.

*

After he had finished in the Father’s rooms, Will hurried to the Seer's apartment to complete his morning duties. The Father would dress leisurely, and had a couple of appointments to follow, but then Will was expected back to him for the visit to the fields. It would be unthinkable for him to be late again.

The Seer breakfasted in the long hall with the Priests and had picked up some news while he was there. “I hear you will be having an interesting morning,” he said. “The Overseer tells me he expects you, along with the Father.”

“Yes, that is so,” Will replied. Sure now that the Seer would not understand, he had hoped to avoid the subject of his future entirely. Their strange conversation had not been revisited, and Will thought it would be better to keep it that way.

“It is a fine day for it,” the Seer said.

Will made no comment, and instead cast his eyes around the room for obvious tasks which needed his attention.

“Everything is clean and tidy as you can see. I am used to looking after myself, when not in a Temple. But I do have one request,” the Seer said.

“Of course,” Will said. “Whatever you require.”

He wondered if this was when the Seer would finally ask him for his mouth or his hand. Or maybe he was coy about such matters, and would begin by asking Will to help him bathe. Instead, the Seer surprised Will by asking for something quite different.

“Some exercise is called for - I am finding Temple life to be a little enclosed. I would like you to walk with me.”

“If that is your wish,” Will said, a little taken aback. In many ways it was a more daring demand, to want the Vessel’s company in public, but Will could see no grounds to deny it.

“I will deliver you back to the Father in good time, do not worry,” the Seer said, with a smile. He had re-applied the paint around his eyes and it made them seem very dark, set deep under his brow.

Will nodded and followed the Seer out of his room and down the long winding corridors, into the bright sunshine. The Seer’s cloak swung out behind him as he strode ahead, the clack of his boots on the worn stone floor pulling Will along with him in a kind of daze. Eventually he realised they were heading to the gardens, specifically the private garden with the Vessel’s sundial. When the gates shut behind them, they were completely alone under a wide blue sky.

They walked in silence for a while, at a leisurely pace. Will focused upon the plants, noting which were doing well and which needed attention, and took special pleasure in the ones he had planted himself, years before. It was like greeting old friends. Though the Seer appeared to do the same, Will noticed his sidelong glances. They were not at all surreptitious, and the Seer must be aware Will knew the meaning of his looks. It reminded Will of his stares over the dinner which had welcomed him to the Temple, and he floundered between irritation and curiosity at his behaviour. If he wanted something of Will, why did he not make his request and be done with it?

After some minutes of this, Will could hold back no longer. “Are you going to say what you wish to? Or shall we return inside, not having accomplished whatever it is you brought me

here for?" he said, feeling his cheeks redden.

He knew he should not be so impetuous, but the Seer was being deliberately cryptic in his approaches and Will's patience was at an end.

They had halted their walk almost in front of the sundial. The Seer looked satisfied for a moment, then broke away from Will to circle it.

"It is a topic I think you will not wish to discuss. But think upon it you must," he said, bending to study each of the supplicants in turn. "I fear your future is not what you think it."

"And what do you know of my future?" Will said. "Have you discussed me with the Father? For it is him who is helping me prepare for it."

"Yes, by taking you to the fields. I heard," the Seer said, snapping his eyes in Will's direction. "You are to be granted a piece of land and some livestock, and live out your days as a farmer, is that correct?"

Will squared his shoulders, and said, "That is true. Do you have reason to doubt I am capable of it?"

The Seer had finished his examination of the sundial and came to stand at Will's side. "Absolutely not, I am sure you are capable of much. You have a sharp mind, are not afraid of hard work and, usually, possess good judgement of others."

"I am learning fast, in my judgements of people," Will said. "Perhaps I am not as worldly as you, but I will be in time, and I will see the truth of things far more quickly in future, I assure you. You have taught me a good lesson."

The Seer moved quickly, and Will found himself backed up against the sundial before he could do anything else.

"Good. You should turn that upon others, too. And meditate upon how you came to be here." He placed firm hands on Will's shoulders and spun him round, to face the dial. "What do you notice about these statues?"

He was held forcefully in place, with the Seer pressed against his back. Angrily, he tried to shrug him off but the Seer only pulled him more tightly against himself. His fingers had wound around Will's biceps, their tips digging into his bare skin. Will knew he was caught, and the Seer wouldn't let him get away.

He looked at the statutes, beginning to be afraid.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Will said, considering shouting for help. Instead he twisted his head round to look at the Seer. His face was calm even though his grip was strong.

"What do they have in common, Will? Look at them."

He looked again, trying to find the words the Seer wanted to hear, so he would be released. "They are all kneeling. And young."

“And what does that tell you?”

“I don't understand. Please let me go.”

“You must face it, one way or another. Better now, than when it is too late.”

“You're hurting me,” Will said.

“They are slaves,” the Seer said. “Not faithful worshippers.” He bent close to Will's ear and said softly, “Just like you.”

Then he released Will and stepped back, away from him entirely. Will ignored him, his thoughts of fleeing had vanished as soon as the Seer let go him. Instead, he leaned close to the statutes. They were worn but if he looked closely he could see the chains around their ankles, looped around the base of the dial. His mind went very still for a moment, before it erupted into furious activity.

He stood ramrod straight and faced down the Seer. “I do not have chains,” he said, then turned on his heel, leaving him standing alone in the garden.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Tags have been updated - as I'm still writing this, there may be more to be added.

Will marched out of the garden and straight into the Temple Quarters. He only made himself slow when he neared the Father's apartments. His heart was hammering nearly out of his chest and he could still feel the Seer’s fingers pressing into his bare skin. He expected to find livid red imprints, evidence of his unforgiving hands, but no trace of them was to be seen. He walked directly past the guards and, a safe distance beyond them, paused to lean against the wall. It was cool and solid, and beautifully indifferent to his distress. There he waited until his anger abated and he felt more composed.

But he could not linger long. He had lost track of time and couldn’t say whether minutes or hours had passed since he went to the Seer’s room. There was also an uncomfortable possibility that other things lay hidden beneath his anger - feelings, thoughts and many, many questions. If so, he did not want to discover them within the Father’s apartments and with a day’s work still ahead.

When Will knocked, he was admitted to the Father's private rooms immediately. The shout which told him to enter rang out loud and clear, and Will soon discovered the Father’s temper had been roused again, this time by one of the Priests. Before they could leave, Will had to listen to an extensive list of the Priest's faults and the things he had done that a monkey could have managed better. Its familiarity was comforting and everything seemed exactly as it should be. Will breathed out a little, feeling more sure the things the Seer had said were either inconsequential or lies.

The visit to the fields went as well as could be expected with the Father in a turbulent mood. Over the course of the morning, he had decided that it was unaccountable he had been forced to make a personal appearance, and that the engineers should have been able to resolve the matter alone. He had many claims on his time and he now felt this was not the best use of it. At first, the Overseer had quaked somewhat, taken by surprise that the Father was so put out over something which this morning he had been only too glad to involve himself in. Then they both walked off together, deep in consultation, prodding at the boggy ground and followed by an engineer hastily drawing up their plans. Will was mostly forgotten, and learned very little.

There were still the hills, though, rising up in the distance. The early mists had cleared but the light of the sun etched each ridge with bright gold light. He must ask the Seer about them, he thought, then remembered he couldn’t. Not anymore. And Will learned that what lay under his anger was a terrible and disappointed sadness. The Seer was strange and infuriating, but he was also different to anyone else he knew, and spoke to Will of things no one else had nor

would again. All was spoiled now, by his insinuations and by his disrespectful roughness. Although Will would see him every day and continue to serve him, he could not have his conversation or listen to his stories as before.

The Father remained gruff but he was at least satisfied his time had not been completely wasted. Before they left the fields, a proposal was found for the drainage problem which everyone agreed upon. Will's thoughts had drifted and he missed the details, but it involved digging a new ditch in another part of the field. While the discussion continued around him, he had reminded himself that, although the day had not been the pleasant one he had hoped for, he had much to look forward to. In a few months' time, he would leave the Settlement and could walk those same hills if he wished. That would be far better than hearing the Seer talk of them, and he would have stories of his own to tell.

On returning to the Quarters, he was dismissed. The Father wished to rest and then intended to write to his learned correspondents. Sometimes Will assisted him - he would dictate and Will would take notes, learning the latest theories of divine order or new discoveries in building construction as they went - but this afternoon solitude would suit him best. Privately, Will agreed with him.

It was midday, and with the searing heat many came inside to be fed. Even the slaves were sent to the relative cool of the servers' hall, for a slave with sunstroke could not work no matter how much he was ordered to. As Will only dined in the long hall alongside the Father, he would have to take his meal with them. He did not welcome the thought as the company there tended towards the boisterous. Workers of all kinds ate together, temporarily granted respite from their masters, which led on occasion to noisy ribaldry. Some of them were free men, earning a better living in service than they could in other kinds of work. The slaves were quieter, happy for a time to exist freely in the space of their own minds. The few women, kept to the laundries and the kitchens, had another room to eat in which Will had never seen. Will was treated with a kind of fearful respect and was left mostly in peace. Usually he did not mind, but today he thought he would find it peculiarly lonely to dine sitting alone among so much noise. Instead, he collected bread, cheese and a jar of rough malted ale to be taken back to his cell.

For the rest of the day, he busied himself with small tasks, some necessary and some not. He took up some mending, swept his own floor, and washed his linen. At the customary hour of his exercise in the garden, he remained firmly inside. The Seer would not be present in person but Will would see him there all the same, and himself too, forced him to stand in front of the sundial and find things in it he did not want to. Tomorrow he must return, to complete his daily task of contemplation, but reasoned he had done quite enough of that already this morning.

*

That evening, the Father's gregarious nature reasserted itself and he invited Will to accompany him at dinner in the long hall. It was a sort of apology for his earlier brusqueness and the unfulfilled promise of Will's visit beyond the Walls. He believed in the pleasures of companionship and conversation and thought this an act of kindness. Though Will was not overly fond of the society of others, it suited him perfectly. As well as the more civilised

atmosphere, he could not speak unless spoken to - and that almost never happened. Plus the food was far superior to that of the servers' hall.

Of course, there he would meet with the Seer again. He had dreaded stumbling across him all day, but now was ready to face up to the fact he could not be avoided. Will must attend on him before he retired to bed, and then again in the morning, and so on, as if nothing had happened. While he'd cleaned, washed and tidied he had spent much time musing upon what should be done about him, if anything.

There was the option of telling the Father of the Seer's behaviour, and thus a possibility he need never see him again. But in this case, Will was not at all sure what he could say. Though the Seer's strength and determination had alarmed Will, he found he had no fear that the Seer meant to hurt him. In the past, no matter what liberties the men of the Temple had taken with his person, no one had ever handled him roughly, and no one would dream of doing so now. Except for the Seer, it now seemed. Will had glimpsed in him a capacity for controlled violence, something unheard of in one occupying a position thought harmlessly intellectual. And yet, Will was not afraid of him.

What he did fear were the Seer's words.

He had argued with himself about their untruthfulness and their intent to disturb and disrupt. But it was no use - it didn't seem to matter if he believed the Seer or not, Will's peace had been unbalanced regardless. He could not unhear and could not unsee what the Seer had shown him, and neither could he help but supply the next words the Seer would utter. The Seer did not believe Will's future lay outside the Settlement, with his own land and his own freedom. The Seer would tell him that this was a lie and that the Father deceived him. And once Will had allowed the possibility, even if he rejected it, he could not remain unchanged. To doubt the Father was unthinkable after his many efforts to prepare Will for his future. But it was a disease the Seer had successfully contaminated him with and it had spread without consent.

The result of his deliberations was simple. As all he had to show for the Seer's interference was a little hurt pride and a few ragged holes in his peace of mind, he could tell the Father nothing. The Father held the Seer in high regard, and Will would need to provide evidence for any accusations he levied. If there was none to wield, he could not see a way to avoid the Seer's presence. He must just close his ears to him and wait it out. The Seer would leave soon, and then Will would be free of his influence.

*

Will prepared himself very carefully for when he would once again look upon the Seer, and was almost annoyed to not find him seated at dinner. He had hoped to ease himself into the new and slightly lofty approach he intended to take towards him, and felt robbed of the opportunity. Seers were well known for keeping odd hours, so no one else thought it out of the ordinary. But Will felt sure his absence related to their earlier altercation in the garden.

Dinner passed without much incident or interest. Apologetic still, the Father piled his plate high and Will enjoyed a hearty meal. There were meats baked in a rich sauce and fresh, white bread. A full, warm belly brought simple comfort after a difficult day, and several of the other

diners seemed to think the same, eating silently and steadily. Will was not the only one who wished for rest and reflection - the camaraderie was muted and several expressed a desire for their beds. Accordingly, the assembly broke up earlier than usual, and when Will rose with the Father they returned to his rooms alone.

A dread began to grow in Will as he went about his evening tasks and settled the Father for the night. Where earlier he had steeled himself for what must be faced and wished to get it over with, now he felt tired and deflated. The day had been long and wearying, and if only he could begin anew in the morning he felt he would be better equipped to encounter the Seer. He had planned to draw over himself a veil of indifference and, if he could be successful in that tonight, knew it could be sustained.

Will was deeply occupied by these thoughts when he set out for the Seer's rooms. So it wasn't until a hand clamped over his mouth and another hauled him backwards that he realised he had seriously miscalculated. He was half-dragged down a corridor and then pinned against its wall. It was dark and shadowy, and his lantern lay guttering on the floor, but he didn't need the light to know who had captured him.

The Seer said, "I am sorry to do this, but I could not be sure you would visit my room again and I could think of no other way. If you promise to remain still and quiet, I will let you stand more comfortably."

Though he shook with rage, Will nodded, and the weight across his chest lessened. The Seer took his hand from Will's mouth and, too late, Will regretted not having bitten him.

"You have had all day to speak with me, if you wished," he whispered. "How dare you treat me this way. What is it you want?"

"I want you to listen," said the Seer.

"I have done nothing but listen to you," Will answered. "Ever since you arrived you have worked to get inside my head and now I cannot get you out of it."

"Did you think upon what you saw, earlier? Do you still believe you do not have chains?"

"And what concern is my freedom to you?" Will said. "Do you whisper in the ears of the labourers and the field slaves too? I doubt it or you would be found out. So why me?"

The Seer's fingers tightened again. Sharp digs of pain were pressed deep into Will's arms but he did not flinch.

"Wasted potential is unspeakably ugly - you would be better roaming the dusty hills rather than kept indoors to be a placid pet. Your beauty would shine as it was meant to - here it is dulled by drudgery and complaisance."

Will was trapped against the wall still, but stared the Seer down all the same. "Now we come down to it - however dulled, if it is my beauty you want, you are within your rights to take it for yourself. It is not my fault that you won't."

“I think you would accept me gladly, if I asked to have you,” the Seer said. “Maybe that would have been a better route to convince you - to make you sing with pleasure under me, until you realise what you lack.”

“You know I am prevented from such a thing,” Will said, too astonished that the Seer would think it possible to bother denying his implication.

“So you do accept some of your chains, if not all. For where would the Vessel be if he thought his body was his to direct?”

“It is not my own, not yet. It is in the service of the gods and the Father. Why question me about things you already know?”

The Seer pulled a hand sharply back, to rip open the buckle of one of Will’s wrist cuffs. It fell to the floor, and the Seer seized Will’s wrist to hold it up between them.

“You still believe you are not a slave, even as you recognise the truth of your position,” the Seer said, running his fingers over the uncovered scars on his wrist. “Tell me, do your cuffs hide the evidence of your sacred duty from others’ eyes or from your own?”

Will tried to tug his hand away and, failing, said, “Let go of me. They are not for your eyes or anyone else’s outside of the Sufferance.”

“The Father sent you to serve me, did he not, little slave? So if I desire to look upon your marked skin I will.”

Will laughed bitterly. “It’s a strange thing to try to talk me both out of and into being a slave at the same time. What would you rather I be to you? You can’t have it both ways.”

The Seer stared at Will for a long time, his fingers still curled painfully tight around Will’s wrist. Try as Will might, he could not read his thoughts or intentions, and could only wait, chin raised in an attitude of defiance.

Without warning, the Seer released him and stepped back. Will longed to rub the feeling back into his arm but resisted. It was hot, and tingled unpleasantly.

“Neither can you,” the Seer said, before he departed swiftly into the darkness. The sound of his long strides echoed down the corridor, and away from Will.

*

Will waited until they had faded entirely then, snatching up the cuff and the lantern, turned in the opposite direction. He made his way to his cell quickly, a storm of violence raging within. By the time he shut the door he was shaking again. How dare the Seer pull him into a deserted corridor and question him? To be taunted and made to feel worthless, and then to be touched, where he bled from, as part of his most important obligation. As if he hadn’t been imposed upon enough!

Though agitated still, Will tried to ready himself for sleep. He paced his cell as he undressed, folding his tunic with mechanical movements. The arrogant suggestion that Will might desire

him, even after everything he done, rankled greatly, but most of all, it was that the Seer held back on his own desire for Will. He had foisted himself upon Will twice now, pressed himself close and held him in restraint, but refused to admit to what he wanted even as he acknowledged it. When Will had challenged him, he had sidestepped it neatly. It shouldn't be possible for him to shrug it off so easily, when Will could feel the grip of his hands, and where his fingertips had grazed bare skin, and the intimacy of breath hot on his cheek.

There was water for washing left over, and wringing out a wet cloth and scrubbing himself with it helped a little. It was cool on his heated skin and the repetitive actions of scouring himself clean were soothing. Except, with the cloth pressed between his legs, he thought again of a hand tight around his wrist, one steadily cruel and unyielding. And the Seer's eyes, burning into him. Eyes which saw things in him, and thought of him free and found it beautiful.

Will pulled his hand away determinedly. It was only natural, after all. He was young and unwanted excitements were common, especially as he was restricted from self-pleasure. The mere fact of a cockstand was not unacceptable, unless he were to follow through with it. To touch himself to completion was forbidden but he was practised at controlling himself and there was usually no danger.

What did not sit comfortably was that it was the Seer he saw in his mind, and that it made his excitement worse. The remembered sensation of a lean, strong body against his was hard to dismiss and it disturbed him. He thought of the way his eyes would take what he wanted even if he would not act upon it. He could ask Will to serve him and Will would have to obey - then he would seem like any other Temple man, and Will could be at ease again. Instead, Will's treacherous imagination pictured how the Seer might serve *his own self,* with his hot palm and strong grip. How his fingers could coax easy pleasure out of himself, freely spilling his emission without any guilt or disobedience.

His skin prickled like it did on a God's Day, after the elixir had begun to work. Heat rose in him once more but this was different, a slow undulation of warmth uncurling through his belly and down between his legs. If he was to bring himself under control he must do it now, or temptation would pull at him too powerfully. More than anything, he must be sure he could perform the Sufferance, for the next was tomorrow.

Then a voice seemed to speak in his ear and, to make it worse, Will knew whose voice it was. It urged him, just once, to disobey. It told him it was a freedom he should taste. It said that no one would know but himself, and that he would still be able to perform the Sufferance, for he was young and well-practised. The voice thought him beautiful and worthy of his own pleasure, and wished to see him defiant in it.

Will looked down at himself, at his arousal standing proudly erect. Rarely did he see himself this way. In the mornings, when he awoke at a stand, he would cover himself hastily and it never lasted past the cold water he washed in. During the Sufferance he only saw the visions and his memories of the God's Day rites were blurred by the elixir. Often all he recalled of those were steady rhythmic thrusts, what seemed like many hands stroking over his skin and a wild longing which was not his own.

Breathlessly, he brushed his fingertips lightly down his straining length, and then softly cupped his testicles in his palm. They sat high and firm, full of his seed, ready for release. He was familiar with the shape and heat of a prick in his hand, but had not touched himself for a long time. Not since he became Vessel and rarely before then. Slaves had little time or privacy for that, and he had not joined the others when they retired to lessen their frustrations together.

The tip was slick under his fingers, and the sensation of something so forbidden caused needle-hot shivers to run through him. He should make himself stop, but the voice his head continued to speak. Stroking the head with more determination, he imagined his fingers were a tongue, licking at the wetness which welled there. That was worse than forbidden, his fluids were only spilled for the gods, and the guilty pleasure which thrust into his gut at the thought should not have encouraged him further. But further he went, and he saw that the tongue might be followed by a mouth - one with full, well-shaped lips - and be accompanied by a beard, to scrape roughly at his thighs as it swallowed him down.

Will moaned once, and covered it quickly with his hand. He was leaking now, his shaft slick, panting and desperate. He gripped himself tightly and fisted himself once, twice, and then was shooting ropes of stickiness up across his stomach.

Lowering himself shakily to the straw mattress, he looked down in shock at what he'd done - how he had lost control of himself so entirely as to bring himself to completion. His heart sickened with guilt, and *who and what* he had thought of washed his inside with shame. The urge to make amends quickly followed. His spend was streaked over his hand, as well as his stomach. He brought it to his mouth and tasted it, finding its bitter-salt the same as any other man he had known, and was seized with an idea. He licked his hand clean and, with his other, scooped the mess on his stomach up with his fingers. Maybe this way his emission would not really be wasted, and he could undo some of his sin.

When he had finished he bathed himself again, and went to bed defeated. His remaining shame settled deep into bones as he lay sleepless. Somehow the Seer had occupied a place deep inside him - Will could feel him there, triumphant. What Will didn't understand was why he persisted, or why the sensation of the Seer’s breath tickled still across his cheek.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

The tags have been updated again

UPDATE: a million thanks to theseavoices for the amazing illustration at the end of this chapter <3 - you can find it on her ao3 here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After he finished his morning's work for the Father, Will did not hesitate. He went straight to the Seer's room and, upon walking inside, immediately saw its orderliness. All of his usual tasks had been taken care of - everything was tidy, neat and clean.

"As you can see, I have no need of your attendance," the Seer said, cross-legged on the bed, with sheets of writing spread out around him. "So if you're not expected to be anywhere else for the next hour, why not take the opportunity to sit and converse with me?"

The deliberateness of the scene was obvious. The Seer had taken care to position himself as unthreatening, in studious repose with his eyes averted, focused on his work. Though he needn't have taken such pains, this morning Will was glad of it. For good or for ill, he had woken to find he was free of obligations towards the Seer, in private at least. And, even more importantly, Will felt he was owed something from him and had come here to get it. A civilised conversation would be his best opportunity.

"Yes, I will, thank you" he replied, and was pleased to see a flicker of surprise cross the Seer's face. It was nice for once not to be at an immediate disadvantage.

He perched on the end of the bed, aiming for nonchalant and not quite succeeding. The papers spread across it were unreadable to Will, written in an odd language made of flourishing symbols rather than familiar letters. The Seer watched him carefully, his quill poised over one of the symbols, the ink on it still wet.

"And I think this time, we will talk about you," Will said, with determination. "Who are you, really? You may be a Seer in title, but a Seer you are not."

"I disagree," said the Seer, putting the quill aside. "Granted, most with my title are self-satisfied and possess minds grown flabby with contentment. But I am, in fact, a Seer."

"But you do not believe," Will said. "After the things you said to me, you cannot."

"I believe in gods, and I believe in great whorls of fate, choice and circumstance," the Seer said, as he collected his papers together and placed them on the little table by the bed. "Do I believe that you commune with these powers during your rituals? No. Do I believe they help

keep order? Yes, because the people believe so. Things are not fixed forever in time - change comes. People need gods but they can be deposed, replaced. Just like Vessels are."

Will listened open-mouthed. "But this is blasphemy."

"A true Seer must seek the edges and explore them, fearlessly. But some seem to have forgotten that," said the Seer. "Or were never taught it."

"The Father has educated me very well, and I am sure he too would be surprised to hear you speak those words." Will swallowed his vexation - he must keep his head level or he would not succeed in his aim. "You still have not answered my question - who are you?"

The Seer studied him carefully. "It seems my words have had an effect," he said, after a while. "You come here seeking to understand if you are justified in listening to me."

Unwilling to concede anything further to the Seer, Will kept his mouth tightly shut. But that was precisely why he sat where he did, with a knot of agitation high in his stomach.

"Very well," the Seer said. "I will answer you a question. But are you sure that is the one you wish to ask?"

Will chewed his lip thoughtfully. If he could only ask one then his original question was too vague. And Will had many questions, far too many. Despite everything some were fanciful still, childishly concerned with all the far away places the Seer had travelled through and all the strange things he must have seen. Those he discounted, no matter how much his heart longed to hear them answered. As for the rest, how could he choose the right one? What he really needed was to understand more of was the man who was not the Seer. For every question Will could ask, the Seer would bend his answer to suit his own ends. So Will settled his mind on one, and hoped to learn as much from what the Seer did not say, as from what he did.

"What were you, before you were a Seer? Tell me that."

The Seer appeared gratified by this choice, as if Will were a student who had just demonstrated an aptitude for something unexpected.

"That is a better question, and I will need to tell you some of my story to answer it."

He smiled a strange smile - just a brief uncurling of his lips and a considering incline of his head. Along with the quantities of dark paint smeared across his face, he looked half-wild. Will did not feel more inclined to trust in him but he grew easier. He understood wild creatures and knew how to manage them.

The Seer settled comfortably back against his pillows, crossed his legs at the ankle and gestured for Will to sit beside him.

"You are quite safe. I will not touch you again unless you permit it," he said. "Sit here, by my side, and listen."

Will regarded him warily but shuffled awkwardly up the bed as directed. The pillows were soft and plentiful, and he was unused to their comforts.

“How old were you when you were taken?” the Seer asked.

“I was five,” Will said. “Or thereabouts.”

“Five is a good age, if there must be one. It is possible to adapt, and forget quickly,” the Seer said. “I was twelve.”

Will gaped. That was impossible. None of the holy men could have risen from slavery - novices were all children of the richest free men.

The Seer smiled. “But you did not ask how I became a Seer. Maybe I will tell you that another time.

“We lived a long way from here, in a land in the far west. It was cooler and greener, and there were verdant glades and mountains. My people farmed, and kept horses, and were renowned for their valiance in battle. That is why they took me - I was tall and strong but not yet grown. I might be useful to them, once trained, and if not I could always be put to work as a labourer.

“As slaves we worked for the soldiers, cooking and cleaning. And then later, when they felt we could be trusted, we learned how to maintain weapons and carried them for our masters, until eventually we might be taught to wield them in battle.”

“So you were a soldier?” Will asked. He had little experience with soldiers but of the few he'd seen they seemed somewhat like the Seer - calm and self-contained, with movements precise and deliberate. It was not a stretch to imagine him wielding a sword.

“I didn't make it that far,” the Seer said. “I had other concerns, ones I never to spoke to anyone of. As a slave I was quiet, but not as obedient as you.”

“My obedience is to the gods,” Will replied. “And my freedom is near.”

“As you say,” the Seer said. “You are a slave still.”

Will was tired of being told what he was or wasn’t. “I am not one now, talking to you, am I?”

The Seer’s eyes narrowed. His gaze travelled the length of Will's body, right down to his toes. Will let him look his fill - he felt its truth in his bones.

“No, it appears you are not,” the Seer said, after some deliberation. “Though-” His hand hovered in question, over Will's leg, just below his tunic.

With some trepidation, Will gave his permission with a short nod. The Seer’s tanned and roughened hand so near to his own bare skin brought his transgression reluctantly back to mind. He would keep trying to put it from him though he had not yet succeeded.

The Seer was gentle, his touch brief but warm before he withdrew.

He smiled again at Will. “You are a kept boy, still - soft, and pampered just enough to be pleasing. Nothing to do but answer to the whims of your master, and occupied by trivialities which prevent you from thinking too much.”

The provocation was deliberate, but irritatingly Will couldn’t stop himself from flushing. “The words you speak do not tally with your desires,” he said. “You may think me pampered but you would not turn me from your bed.”

The Seer’s eyes lingered upon him again, this time more covetously. “I would only have you willing. Your position makes that nearly impossible, though I am glad to hear you feel free in my company.” He paused for a few moments, then looked away. “They took my sister, also. She was almost the same age as you were. I never saw her again and I do not know exactly what they did with her. But I know what happens to many women, and to Temple boys like yourself.”

Will tried to reply but found he did not know how to. He wanted to be angry and to make some kind of protest - he'd always been treated well; it wasn't that bad; it was only for a few more months. But in the end, they both knew it was simply that he had no other choice and must accept his fate.

“It's possible to live still,” he said. “I am here, whole and alive. Maybe your sister is too.”

“I do not think so. I looked but only found the men who took her. That was a long time ago.”

The questions the Seer had asked of his own past flashed back to him. Maybe Will lived on in somebody’s mind - someone who still missed him and of whom he no longer thought. When he’d been young his memories had been fresher. They had never brought him anything but pain so he had buried them, until all he had left was a dim sense of loss. Sometimes the set of someone’s shoulders or an abbreviated smile would flare it brighter, into the sting of an old and aching wound. To recognise a gesture but be unable to place its source was almost worse than having nothing left at all.

“Who were they, these men that took you both?” Will asked.

“The very ones you live among, of course. Not the exact same men, but their kin. The Settlements are rich and there are some from outside who would take what you have, ransack the Temples. Did you not know you are protected by armies of soldiers?”

Will shook his head. There was so much he didn’t, and he was increasingly uncomfortable about that.

“There are camps, placed at intervals around the Settlements, beyond the farm lands. The soil here is good and it makes the Settlements prosper.”

“And what is to be found beyond the camps?”

“A swathe of land claimed by no one and everyone. The Settlements try to control it - there are lookouts on the hills and bands of soldiers roam it widely. But it is too large to be managed easily and there are others who would tell you it is theirs, who are not so organised

nor so set upon conquest. Soon there will be a conflict or retreat - the Settlements grow larger and their territory expands along with their power."

Many more questions and implications occurred to Will, shattering his peace of mind further as they splintered in a hundred different directions.

"The world is busier than I had ever imagined and it looks like I cannot simply strike out on my own and survive. Is this what you meant when you doubted my future?"

"No. There are places you could live unnoticed by many, too small to be a threat or a prize. I could help you accomplish that."

"Which is why the Father has encouraged me to seek your advice," Will said. "He has trusted you to help me and you have betrayed him. Though you have not said it plainly, you mean me to know he lies to me."

The Seer did not flinch from Will's accusation - in fact, he seemed to welcome it. "If it is any comfort, I think he lies to himself just as much."

A silence fell upon Will. The Seer's words were no longer a surprise to him but there was much for him to puzzle over. After some moments had passed, he remembered what day it was and where he must be.

"I must go. The Sufferance begins within the hour."

"Yes," the Seer said. "Go - the Father will expect you."

Will drew his legs up and swung them to dangle over the edge of the bed. He could feel the Seer's eyes on his back, boring between his shoulders. As he crossed the room he tried to shake himself free of the clinging threads of their talk.

"You will be there?" Will asked, as he stood by the door.

"Of course," the Seer said, as he slid from the bed and with slow, long strides came to stand before Will. "Everybody attends the Sufferance."

"Even though you do not believe in what I achieve through it," Will said. It mattered, suddenly, that the Seer thought him futile. "In me."

"That does not mean I do not find it beautiful," the Seer replied. "Cruel, and beautiful. And you shine in it."

*

The hush within the Temple settled like thick dust over Will's senses. He let its familiarity guide him through his tasks. With his back to the congregation, he worked silently through the pile of little papers at his side. One told of the loss of an aged parent, the next spoke of worries of hunger over winter, the one after of fears for a sickly child. As he read, in his mind's eye he saw each as though it happened to him. The sensations were sharp and pointed,

piercing his heart. He sank into their distresses and made them part of him. Once accomplished, each paper was given to the candle flame and existed no more.

Though he was barely halfway through, his face was wet with tears. Even within their small Settlement there was so much suffering - how much must there be in the world outside it?

The next slip of paper was written in slanted, elegant letters. It read: *Once I discovered they no longer had her, I took a blade and sliced open those men. I pegged them out for the carrion birds and watched their agonies, until they told me some of what they had done with her. Then I left them to their fate. Cry for my sister, Vessel, but not for me.*

Will let out a sob, and covered quickly it with his hands. He was shaking, he couldn't breathe. He must not turn around, though he felt a pull to seek out the eyes watching him intently from their dark-painted sockets. The images which rose from these words were so clear - the blonde-haired girl, tiny and pitiful in death; the writhing agonies of the men, under a scorching sun, eaten alive by scavengers; and beside them someone tall, graceful and self-contained, hungry for vengeance and for understanding of terrible things no one should know.

He could not pause - there was no time for him to wonder at the meaning of this confession, nor to untangle his overwhelmed thoughts. He was there only to feel and transform, and must simply reach for the next piece of paper and keep going. With trembling fingers, he held the Seer's words out to the candle and watched it burn away to nothing.

But the knowledge fluttered along the edges of his mind, like a moth against glass, restlessly seeking entry. It was there while the Father gave him the fever-potion, and the nausea and the sweats became those of the dying men. The shadows which followed were formed in torturous shapes, made of grief and rage, and driven by a ravenous need for balance. They swarmed the podium he knelt on, and behind his blindfold Will watched with fascination as they crept towards him. The Father was right in their midst and Will could not understand why he did not mind their scratching, tearing claws.

When he was bled, the shadow-creatures remained like smoke, scenting his wounds. At every moment, Will expected one to lean in and taste him, but they did not. They remained crouched back on their haunches, like starving animals afraid to approach. It was only during his last act of the Sufferance that one advanced to claim him.

In the congregation, he saw a noble face with amber-red eyes, wreathed with lantern-shadows. The figure rose to his feet, and the shadows morphed, branching and stretching high into the air until he was something unnatural - a thing crowned with onyx antlers, who stalked towards him. Will shivered, his prick at a straining stand, curved up towards it, with his knees pressed to the grit of the cold stone floor. Though he felt fear, there welled in him something like longing. The creature was only a vision of his fevered mind, but he wished to free his tied hands, to run them unseeing over its muscled flanks, to feel the strength and certainty of it under them.

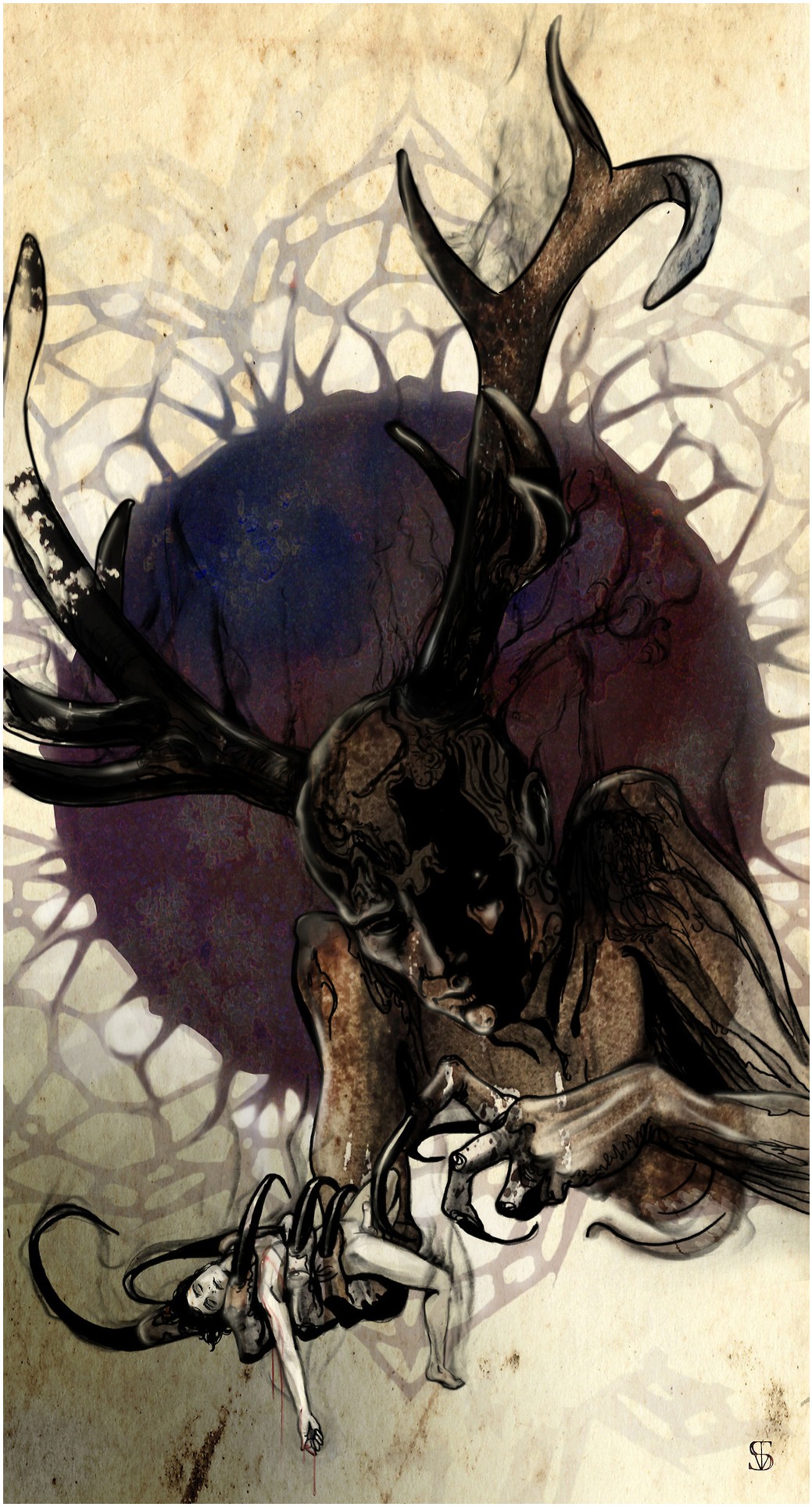
Will's breathing was ragged already and he was close to his climax, gripped by his frenzied imaginings. The creature bent to him, and he could feel its breath on his face, over his lips. It drew one long finger down his length, through his slick fluids, and brought it to his mouth. A

moan escaped him, he arched backwards, panting. His hardness throbbed, near painful, and he worked his muscles rhythmically in time, desperately chasing his release.

Take what is yours, the creature whispered, brushing its finger over his lips. *Become as you should.*

He curled his tongue around its finger, sucking it deep into his mouth. He could taste himself on the creature's skin, could feel its knuckle under his sealed lips. Then the creature closed its hand tight around his length and Will cried out, spilling into its palm.

Before him, the congregation got to their feet and sang, while he knelt still, alone and panting, shuddering with unwanted knowledge.



Chapter End Notes

To everyone cheering me on with this - a million thanks <3333

It's very unlikely there will be an update next weekend, as I will be at Behold the Red Dragon con. If you happen to be there, feel free to say hi - I will be the one wearing the magpie crown :)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> The short delay between this and the last chapter was due to the Behold the Red Dragon Con, my recovery and then needing to write a Halloween fic - they should be posted more regularly from now on. Also, I spent some more time plotting the rest of story more fully - I'm reasonably sure there will be 12 chapters in total (unless it throws me any surprises!).
>
> Please note I've updated the tags again, and will continue to do so until the fic is fully written.

A patch of bright sunlight glowed on the wall opposite the window. The iron bars threw out dark lines of shadow, dividing its square into narrow strips of gold. Will lay on his side and traced their crisp edges with his eyes, over and over again. Though he should have risen by now, his mind was too full of things he wished he was in ignorance of. It was far easier to lie on his thin mattress and let his thoughts wander.

The Sufferance always left him achingly tired. Traces of fever clung fiercely to his skin and he would sleep heavily, sunk so deep in dreams he would not recall them. The day following flowed by in a syrupy haze, and he would go about his work with leaden limbs, feeling as though his body did not belong to him.

This morning, however, would be a little different. So close to the God’s Day, Will was now released from his usual duties. For the next five days he would prepare himself for the ritual, slowly retreating from Temple life until he was as pure and empty as possible. He would make himself a conduit, ready for the Priests and the Father to do their work, and become the true Vessel. There was much to do before the boy called Will could temporarily be left behind. Through fasting and meditation, he would cleanse his body and mind. The Physician would visit daily, give him medicines, assess his readiness. And, apart from the Physician and the Father, he would see no one.

So he would be safe from the Seer, at least until the next five days had passed. The thought should be a comfort - a gift of time for Will to compose himself and harden his mind against him, to free himself from his influence. There was no comfort to be had, however, as Will knew he had already grown diseased by his own curiosity. To condemn the Seer’s actions, both past and present, should be swift and easy. The teachings of the Temple were very clear. To take another’s life was against everything the gods wished - such justice belonged to their realm alone, not to the human one. Only in direct consultation with them could the Father could measure out life and death. And all Will’s acts as Vessel were to assist the Father in this - to keep the natural order of life and to alleviate suffering.

But Will could not seem to denounce him. Instead, he itched to speak with the Seer, to ask questions and seek to understand. He wanted to hear him tell of it, see the shape of the words as they left his lips. Did it help his suffering to know the torment he had caused those men? What had it felt like and what did he do next? And, most importantly, to know why he had shared his sister's sorrow with Will but kept his own for himself. The need to know, to ask, to comprehend was like a hunger, a swarming mass of darkness, choking him from the inside out. And he was made helpless by it.

*

The day approaching belonged to the moon god - a beacon in a dark sky, shining out wisdom and learning, and a source of consolation in times of trouble. Whichever God's Day it was, Will's obligations were always the same. But in the days leading up to the ritual, he would aim to shape the space inside himself to welcome each individual god. Now, he clung to this practice. He asked for aid and illumination. He did not know what would happen after this next God's Day but maybe, on the other side, he would finally find a path through his confusion.

These were Will's thoughts as he removed his tunic in the antechamber to the bath house. He would bathe daily until the God's Day, would steam and sweat and soak until his skin was pink and his mind clear. By the time he floated in the mineral pool, he usually felt light and free, as if the buoyancy of his spirit echoed that of his body. But this time he did not. No matter how much he thought of a cold bright disk hanging in the sky, it was the soft darkness surrounding it which called to him.

It was late morning and the bath house was empty, save for Will. The other men of the Temple were busily occupied with their work, learned or otherwise. Will could linger, floating suspended between the floor of the pool and the ceiling above him. Reflected lamplight flickered on the ceiling; its kaleidoscopic display had once soothed him. But instead he saw the shadows in between the shimmering lights, and the darkness in the corners of the room intruded upon his mind. He knew within it moved something which glinted, something branched and obsidian. And below him, in the deep water, a dark shape rippled underneath him, close enough to touch. It was waiting for him, and once he turned towards it, it would come for him again.

The only sound was of water echoing from the stone walls. The water's surface was smooth and glassy; he wanted to sink below it, let it swallow him. It lapped against his nakedness and, unwarranted, his fever-dream returned to him. The memory of the creature's touch was more real than any other - the finger which had slid into his mouth, over his tongue, and the knowledge of how he had welcomed it. Giving him the gift of himself, with his essence on its skin. A touch infused with desire, with reverence, just for him. He thought of the Seer's suggestion he could make Will sing with pleasure and knew instantly he would, that Will would be made mad with longing for him, delicious and forbidden.

His arousal was growing - the warmth of his skin was untempered by the cool water, and there was a building restlessness in his limbs. He knew his prick stirred between his legs, stiffening further as he thought of how the Seer might touch him. Will could lay back, as he did now, while confident hands moved over him, and a firm and willing body pressed against

his own. He spread his arms wide and let himself float. He would not touch himself; would not imagine a dark and dangerous creature watching him, disguised as a man. Let it come to him, if it wanted. He would remain here, displayed and open. Waiting.

Like he would be at the God's Day.

The thought shocked him back to himself. This would not do, he could not be so easily seduced by his own mind. If he could only master himself until the God's day, there was hope. Shakily, he reached for the side of pool and clutched for the stones there. In them were fingerholds, worn deep with age. He held himself pressed to the water's edge, sheltered from his untethered thoughts.

Immediately after bathing, he would visit the Father. It would be a timely reminder of his duties and he would feel more secure in his presence. Will breathed a little easier, his flights of fancy receding even as he considered it.

The remainder of his ablutions were brisk and resolute, and he was more confident of his abilities. He would make the Father proud, and deserve the honour of the title 'Vessel'.

*

Once dried and dressed, he went directly to the Father's rooms. He happened across a couple of Priests in the gloomy corridor, but they let him pass with averted eyes, and he saw no one else.

The Father's warm welcome, and Will felt himself rally even further under it.

"Good day, Will," he said, once they were seated by the window. "How are you feeling?"

"Very well, thank you," said Will. "I am always a little tired after the Sufference, but it has lessened since I bathed."

"You work very hard for us. And I know you are capable of much. Rest your body and your mind today - that will do as much to prepare you as anything."

Will nodded and drew some strength from this - the Father's certainty was sustaining. It seemed to point out the way back to himself and he would let it guide him. A tightness he did not know he carried lessened in his chest, and he knew he had been right to seek him out.

The Father studied him for a few moments. "Perhaps you do look a little pale. I will send for something nourishing for you, while you are here. And this afternoon, you will sleep. The Physician can give you something to help, if needed. You will tell him that, when you see him later."

"Thank you, Father," Will answered. "That is very kind of you."

A warming stew arrived in minutes, and the Father sat opposite until Will had finished the bowl. He did feel better for it - his spirit gladdened along with his stomach, reassured by the Father's care. To sleep dreamlessly that afternoon would be something as well - he would follow the Father's direction and ask the Physician to make it so.

“You look brighter already,” the Father smiled. “We will skip our conversations today so you can rest. Let us do the blessing, and then you can be on your way.”

Will smiled back, at how simple and easy this was. He was alone in his skin again, no creeping darkness or restless forbidden longings. Only his desire to be worthy and serve the Father well.

The Father stood and, before him, Will bowed his head and bent to his knees. His palm rested on the crown of Will’s head; it was a solid, grounding weight. From above, the Father spoke to the gods of Will’s strength and humility, and asked them to watch over him. Will listened with all his heart, and with every passing minute felt its truth take root there and grow. The gods cared for him, kept him safe, and so did the Father.

When he finished speaking, Will remained, unmoving, heart thudding under his ribs. The warmth he derived from the Father’s company filled an emptiness he had not noticed before. Coupled with the lingering threads of his arousal, it stirred something within, but which now looked like security, not reckless abandon. If he had light to hold onto, perhaps he could turn his back to the beckoning dark.

The Father was so very close. Will reached up a hand towards him, not touching, just hovering in the air between them.

“I know you would not order me to - you are a good man,” Will said. “But I would be willing, if you desired me so.”

The Father took a sudden step back, and opened his mouth as if to speak but shut it before he could. Then, with a firm and deliberate kindness which made Will’s stomach hollow with hot shame, he said, “That is impossible, Will. I am not angry but you must not ask that of me again.”

Will wrenched his arm back, and cradled both hands to his chest. They were shaking; he clenched them into fists to make them stop. The thickness in his throat made speech difficult but he forced himself to form words. “I am sorry, Father, I spoke out of turn.”

When he rose to leave, the Father planted a heavy hand on his shoulder, and Will could not escape his gaze. In it, and in the farewell smile the Father gave him, Will found only pity.

*

Waiting in his cell for the Physician, Will tried to sleep but could not. He was late. On his arrival, Will would ask for enough medicine to put him to sleep until tomorrow morning. And of what he would do after that, he did not think.

When a knock finally sounded, Will calculated he had been there for two hours, watching the shadows lengthen as they swung round the room. He did not call for the Physician to enter - they did not need his permission, after all. He remained on his bed, staring unseeingly at the ceiling, until he heard footsteps enter the room and the latch settling into place again.

“Good afternoon, Will. The Father tells me you are out of sorts.”

In a clumsy, desperate movement, Will scrambled to his feet. “Where is the Physician?” he asked, eyes seeking out the door, the one the Seer had just closed behind them.

“The Physician is unfortunately indisposed,” said the Seer. “So the Father asked me to call on you instead, as I too have knowledge of medicine.”

He was perfectly calm and displayed no obvious threat or even disquiet over the knowledge they now shared. Will wished to run, then, to get away from him and from everything else. If only that were possible - to go and not look back, to be free of the others’ influence and live quietly by himself. But it was not within his power to make such a thing happen.

Will sank back down onto the bed, arms braced on the mattress to keep himself upright. He found his breathing had sped up without his knowledge, and it was becoming harder to keep pace with it.

The Seer frowned a little, and seated himself next to him. He took hold of Will’s wrist, pressed two fingers firmly against it, and paused as if listening. Then he grasped him by the chin to gently move Will’s head, looking into his eyes and mouth. Will sat dumbly and allowed it, as if it happened to someone else. But somehow he caught some of the Seer’s untroubled attitude, and the blood racing through him seemed to slow.

“Do you have any pains or complaints?” the Seer asked.

“No,” Will said.

The Seer released his hold and looked into Will’s face, utterly composed still. “Is there anything troubling you?”

This was an unexpected and audacious show of daring. Will bit down his hysterical laughter and did not speak a word, not of the Seer’s confession nor of the rejected offer he had made to the Father. But he made sure to look the Seer in the eye, with knowing defiance.

“You are tired,” the Seer said. “You should rest.”

And Will was tired; tired to the bone and desperate for escape.

“Yes,” he replied. “I want to sleep. Make me sleep.”

The Seer nodded, and pressed his fingers to Will’s wrist again. And then to the soft skin under his jaw as well. There was a soft leather bag on the floor and from it he drew a small bottle filled with a rusty-coloured liquid and a contraption Will had never seen before. It was a slim glass tube, with metal fittings. The Seer slotted his fingers neatly into a ring at one end, and into the other screwed a long, thin needle. Another bottle was produced, which smelled unpleasantly strong when unstoppered. The Seer poured a little into a vial and dipped the needle into it. After some minutes, he transferred the needle into the first bottle, then pulled the ring back. With it came the murky liquid, half-filling the glass barrel.

“I could give you some in sugar-water,” the Seer said. “But this will act more quickly and put you straight to sleep. Hold out your arm and do not move.”

Without hesitating, Will did as he was told. The Seer wiped the strong-smelling liquid on his arm with a pad of soft cotton, then nestled the tip of the needle into the crook of Will's elbow. It did not pierce the skin, but Will could imagine it - the sharp give and the needle sliding inside him. Probably he should not let the Seer do this, but Will knew without understanding why that to refuse him would be impossible. He watched the taut give of his pale skin around the needle as it penetrated; the deep push of it into his vein. The Seer drew some of Will's blood up, so it swirled and mingled with the medicine, before he emptied the barrel's contents smoothly into Will.

The effects were rapid, just as the Seer had promised. A warm, uncaring limpness settled over Will, like a thick and smothering blanket. His eyes begin to shut, and the last thing he felt before sleep was a hand, warm around his wrist, and another, stroking his hair back from his face.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> I originally thought this and the next chapter would be posted as one - but I decided it was better to split them and have updated the number of chapters as a result.

It was not until the third day that Will decided he had nothing to lose by speaking his mind. The Physician was still indisposed and the Seer had maintained his strange silence, never once referring to the knowledge which had passed between them. He appeared at intervals to check on Will's bodily health and administer more medicines, but always with a distant, professional attitude.

Will had slept much over the intervening days, a sleep which was heavy and induced, dreamless and welcoming as the grave. Though he was left fogged, it would lift by late morning, leaving him more lucid than he had felt for days. Much time was spent alone in his cell, with little to do but wonder at this imposition of brittle distance between them. It was unsettling after all the Seer's efforts to speak to him, urging Will to consider his place in the Temple and filling him with startling notions. And it occurred to Will that, by staying silent also, he played along with the Seer's wishes.

When the Seer entered Will's cell, Will did not stir from where he lay, and in greeting said only, "Why do you not take advantage of the situation you have created?"

The Seer placed the leather bag on the chair next to Will's bed, and opened it. "What situation is this?"

"Whatever you have done to the Physician, so you can speak with me," Will said, rolling onto his side to watch the Seer. "But you have not yet spoken."

Will watched him search purposefully though the contents of the bag, without answering.

"I see you in my dreams," Will continued. "It is not you, but the creature you are underneath. Without its cloak of personhood."

The Seer turned his head toward Will, finally. "You think I am a demon?"

"I think you are as close as a human being can be."

"And what does it look like, this creature you see?"

Will shifted to sit upright, placing his feet on the floor with deliberation. The Seer stood so close, Will could have prodded the tip of his boot with his own bare toes.

He raised his face to the Seer. “It is made of darkness and shadows. With dark, flinty antlers. It covets me.”

“And what do you think of it?”

“I am not afraid of it. Though it wants to take me, it will not,” replied Will. *Unless, perhaps, I let it.*

“It sounds very frightening.” The Seer turned back to his bag, a shadow of a smile playing across his lips.

“How dare you laugh!” burst out Will. “You showed yourself - you *wanted* to be seen - so do not hide yourself from me now.”

“You are very agitated,” the Seer said. He crouched in front of Will and spoke softly. “The things you describe are symptoms. Let me give you something to relieve you of them.”

Will rubbed his face, miserably. He felt cold, shivery. “I am agitated, yes. And you are a liar.”

The Seer sighed, and stood again. Before he could reach inside the bag, Will said, “I do not want any medicine. I want you to sit by me and talk, as you used to.”

The Seer’s hand hovered over the open bag, and he seemed to wait for Will’s next words.

“You said the Father lied, to me and to himself. Will you do the same?”

“I am tasked with helping you prepare for the rites,” said the Seer.

“You care nothing for those,” Will said. “So why not indulge me? If you want to pretend, go ahead, just do not expect me to do so.”

The Seer considered Will carefully before sitting beside him, a cautious and curious distance away. “What do you wish me to talk of?” he asked.

“Anything,” Will said. He was tired again and longed for impossible, unnamed things which were even more out of reach than the distant hills. Instead he shuffled nearer to the Seer. Up close, his eyes were rich and deep, like honey. “Just let it be the truth. I am weary of make believe.”

And without pausing to think, he curled himself down and lay with his head settled heavily in the Seer's lap. Will shut his eyes. The Seer tensed underneath him, and he waited. After a few seconds, the Seer let out a slow quiet breath and began to speak.

“When I was young, much younger than you, I found a beautiful clearing in a wood. It was almost a perfect oval and the trunk of each tree around its edge was the same thickness and height. The sun shone with the crispness of early spring and the leaves chimed in the wind. It was full of the light, air and music of nature. Small creatures rejoiced to inhabit such a place, while the things which hunted them were thankful for its bounty.

“After I was taken, I thought of that clearing often, until it seemed that if I closed my eyes I could stand within it still. I placed important things there - each tree housed something different, and then their branches and leaves, until it became decorated with memories.”

Behind Will’s eyes, the image of the clearing formed and solidified, until it was as if he too stood there with the Seer. Through it ran a stream, clear and brightly burbling, and the sky above them was a chilly wash of blue. In the very centre was a smooth, round boulder - Will knew without asking what it guarded. He went to it, and felt it’s fine, gritty surface under his fingers.

“Your sorrow lives there,” Will said, opening his eyes to meet the Seer’s. “The reason you did not give it to me at the Sufferance is because you cannot. When you visit the clearing, you keep your back to it always, rather than look upon it.”

The Seer held his gaze for a long moment, watchful and wondering. “It is the source of everything - what came before and after.”

“It is the heart of you,” Will said, lids fluttering shut again. “And yet you cannot look inside.”

“Your perception is even sharper than the Father suspects,” the Seer said. “What is in your heart, Will? What can you not look upon?”

Will already knew something lingered there and tried to turn his mind from it. A dark and buzzing shape, an unformed desire. A chilling hopelessness. Instead of answering, he pressed his cheek against the Seer’s thigh, and let his tears come.

*

The day before the God's Day was one of necessary evils and best borne with sanguinity. But Will had none. A cloud had settled upon him and it could not be shaken off.

With the Father he took extra care to wear a cheerful countenance. The remembrance of his rejection remained, a sickly spread of shame low in his stomach. He was obliged to speak with the Father each morning, of his spiritual duties and of his well-being, but now deep inside lived a tender hurt which Will did his best to suppress. Towards Will, the Father presented a carefully hearty and generous attitude, which was more wounding than a simple, brisk dismissal. More than anything, Will wished to banish the hints of pity which lingered in his eyes.

The Seer, at least, he did not have to hide from.

Today his time with the Father was quick - a mixed blessing, however, for soon the Seer would bring a purging decoction and Will would spend the afternoon in bed, weak and shaking and nauseous.

Will took it stoically and without complaint, while the Seer quietly watched. He would wait out its effects in the bath house annexe - the hot steam helped ease the cramps and shivers it caused.

“I will do my suffering in private,” Will said, before he left. There was something in the Seer’s stance which made Will wonder if he meant to follow. “I know what to expect, and need no physician to spectate.”

“It is a poison they give you, though a small dose. You really should be supervised,” the Seer replied, though he seated himself upon the chair. “It would be a very bad thing for anything to happen to the Vessel, would it not?”

Will left him there without answering.

When he returned, weakened and aching, the Seer still waited in his cell. He looked as if he had not moved from the chair, head up and eyes closed as if deep in meditation. The lines of his bearing were controlled and powerful. He only opened his eyes once Will had stepped inside and shut the door.

“You were in your clearing,” Will said, walking past him and climbing into bed without undressing. He burrowed under the blanket, trying to warm himself. “Looking at your treasures.”

The ides of showing the Seer his own little collection of treasures, carefully stored within the straw mattress he lay upon, bubbled up within him. Will wanted to weep for how childish it seemed. He had lost so much, and never seemed to gain anything in return.

“Not only looking, I was adding.”

A particularly strong bout of shivering wracked him. Will sat to gather the blanket more tightly around himself - a futile attempt to contain his helpless shudders. His hair were damp still, its curl exaggerated by the steam, sticking to his forehead.

“Me?” A bitter smile split across Will’s face, more of a grimace than anything else. “What have I done to deserve such an honour?”

“Now that the dogma you shrouded yourself in has been disturbed, you are revealed. If you shone before, it is nothing compared to you now, as you struggle towards your true self.”

Will looked away. The Seer’s insight was too raw and his eyes too full of fascination.

“I do not want it to be the God’s Day,” Will whispered. “For the first time, I find I am afraid.” He did not know why he admitted this - the Seer would not help him and they both knew it. He would only watch, and wait for what emerged.

“Fear is an animal instinct, and often a trustworthy one. What to do with it when it strikes, is another matter.”

The Seer stood and swept up his cloak from where it was draped over the back of the chair, and smoothly wrapped it around Will. Then he crouched by the bed, his brutal yet restrained interest directed unflinchingly upwards. It struck Will how the threads connecting them were building, becoming dangerously cobwebbed. Each time the Seer made to twist Will into his

designs, he succeeded also in entangling himself. *A victory of sorts,* thought Will, *if a wretched one*.

On impulse, he asked, “Tell me how you became a Seer.” When the Seer paused, his expression closing off, Will persisted. “Do we still have barriers between us? Who would I tell, anyway, if that is your concern? Distract me from my pains.”

“It was very simple,” the Seer said, making his decision swiftly and settling onto the edge of Will’s bed. “I changed my fate. I gave up good and evil, and became my own master.”

“And how did a soldier’s slave manage that?”

“Soon after I found the men who took my sister, a young novice crossed my path. He was venturing out into the world for the first time. The Temple he was destined for was some distance away, and they had never seen him before. We were of a similar age.” The Seer shrugged. “So I took his place.”

Will’s mind filled in the blanks effortlessly - the young Seer escaping his captors, throwing off his yoke to live wild in the woods, reforming himself. His nature would triumph, unchecked by society, until he was ready for vengeance. And then after he found it, discovering he needed more than simple retribution. He would accept nothing less than mastery over the world itself.

“You killed him,” Will said. “And I do not believe he was the last.”

The Seer did not blink. “No, he wasn't.”

“Do you plan to kill me?” Will asked.

“It would be a terrible waste, if I did.”

Will nodded, silently noting that the Seer had considered it, and maybe still did. “What is it like, to take a life?”

With an indulgent look, the Seer replied. “I think you are capable of imagining. Did you never fantasise about avenging yourself on your enslavers?”

Of course Will knew that somewhere the men responsible for taking him went about their own lives, unhindered and free. And that they had taken him from something called *family*, a concept which he could only distantly understand. Even more remote was the idea of a mother. He had known so few women in his life but he had seen them in the Settlement, calling to their little ones when they wandered off during market days. Impatient and admonishing at first, but underneath it lived a fierce and loving gentleness. Through many Sufferances, Will had heard enough of their worries and fears to realise what he had lost.

Early on, he had thought and wished and hoped for many things but he had soon learned that no good came of it. Time could not be reversed, and he had made the best of what he had. However little that was.

“Did you know one of them was here, in the Temple?” the Seer said, and leaned back to watch the effect of his words.

The shock Will felt should not have been so great. It had long been clear that the Seer was leading him to something - some crisis where he would abandon Will to his own devices, desiring only to stand back and observe the outcome. In retrospect, it felt inevitable that this was the news he was to deliver.

“You already know I did not,” Will said, conscious of a numbness in his heart and mind. “Or you would not have bothered to tell me.”

Instead of anger, the deadness of sensation collapsed into exhaustion. The Seer had timed his revelation well, and Will could not fight back. He lay down against his pillows while his thoughts swirled aimlessly, and his shivers increased.

The Seer stretched out beside him, and the temptation was too great. Will reached for him, pressed his face into his chest, and let himself be held. A false comfort, maybe, but a comfort still.

Will shut his eyes, and waited for sleep to take him.

*

The morning of the ritual was bright and sunny, but its warmth did not address the chill in Will’s breast. He awoke from a natural sleep, his body mostly recovered from the day before and in need of nourishment. Food was delivered to him early, to revive him enough for day ahead, and he ate steadily and with concentration. Then he bathed, soaking long in the pool, drifting with its ripples and eddies. He would not see the Father until the rites later, so he could loiter alone with his thoughts.

A nervous calm had settled over him - events were rushing fast towards him but until the inevitable occurred, there was nothing more he could do. When the time came, he would act, even if he did not yet know how.

It was when the Seer arrived to examine him and dispense the elixir, that Will knew his precipice approached. The rites were due within the hour - once he took the elixir he would have little time. It would fast take him somewhere else, into the realm of the gods, and he would leave his own concerns behind. As soon as the Seer had shut the door behind him, Will stood and disrobed in the centre of the room.

“I cannot any longer say if this is a charade,” Will said. “But we both have duties and what needs to be done, must. So let us complete them with as little disturbance as possible.”

The Seer took a few moments to approach, appraising Will from a distance. Then he circled Will slowly, carefully. When he spoke, it was from behind Will, close to his ear.

“And what kind of examination did our friend the Physician like to give you?”

“Not the kind you are implying,” Will said, over his shoulder. “And if he had, what is it to you?”

Though they did not touch him, Will could feel the Seer’s hands where they hovered over his arms and down along his back, a mere inch above his skin.

“They do not know what they keep amongst them,” the Seer said, eventually. “They are all blind to you. To your potential.”

Will’s voice was caught in his throat, chest tight with emotion. He squeezed his eyes shut.

“You have taken everything from me,” he said. “Now what must I do? I was happy before, or at least enough to survive on.”

“Survival is a process. Through its pain we can rise to become something else.”

“And now I must survive this too,” said Will. “You will leave me alone soon - with all that you have shown me, itching under my skin.”

“Not unless you choose to be.”

Will turned with a frown. The Seer held the robe he was to wear. It was silk, a bundle of glowing sapphire in his hands.

“I have given you freedom, Will. Or at least the path to it,” the Seer said, and slid the robe over him.

His expression was almost tender when he passed Will the elixir.

“It is time to drink.”

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> So this is the chapter that warnings at the beginning of the fic apply to most and contains *a lot* of sex while under the influence of drugs. It is possible to skip this chapter without too much plot being missed, if that concerns you.

The Temple was all in shadow, lit only by candles which transformed the echoing space into enclaves of glowing peace. Soft fabrics draped the altar, and above it a canopy was strung, richly embroidered with scenes of moon-god lore. Its phases waxed and waned across it in silver thread and in the centre an image of the god himself gazed down upon the Temple, his presence continual and always shifting. As soon as the Father had blessed him, Will would lie back and call to him with his mind. The moon would descend into him, and for a brief time, he would know God.

His memory was already hazy. The Seer had delivered him to the Temple and Will retained only fractured impressions of their journey, but ones of beautiful sensation. The worn stones of the corridors spoke to him of great age and wisdom, their surfaces polished smooth over time. Light from the Seer's lantern had scattered gently across their path, like a cloud of fireflies. The Seer's hand on his arm was liquid heat - he had walked at Will's side, a guide of glittering darkness, a beast part-human and all the more beguiling for it.

Now Will was alone and could not remember the Seer taking his leave. It seemed wrong that he could not stay to witness the wonder of the rites. The Seer would appreciate them, Will thought. He would enjoy Will's transformation into sacred object and admire his submission to a higher power. Will could imagine him easily, observing from a dark corner, though his interest would be distant still. How would he appear when he released his self-imposed constraints? There was a reason Will should not wish to see this, but his memory failed to supply him the reason why. All that he knew was that he did very much, and moreover, wished to be the cause of it. What an honour that might be, to have such a strong and determined will bend because of his very presence. And what great rewards might it wield?

He stood by altar and wished to feel the silk drapes sliding under him but knew he must wait for the Father. Instead he loitered close by, watching the soft flicker of candlelight across their rippled surfaces. His robe was gone - he did not know when or who had taken it - but was not cold. The air itself had substance, which warmed and caressed him, welcoming him. He belonged here - he had been chosen for this purpose. All was as it should be.

When the Father approached, Will sighed gratefully and closed his eyes in expectation of the blessing. Fingers dipped with scented oil were drawn across his brow, and over the scars on his chest and wrists. Afterwards, the Father smiled and a tranquility settled into Will's spirit. Something was healed inside him; he felt a wound close itself and mend seamlessly. He knelt

in obedience, and listened as the Father spoke words of praise and invocation. He was radiant and strong, burnished with a glowing light, and his voice, deep and sonorous, thrummed through Will. He leaned into it, and he felt his mind and heart open.

Gentle fingers raised his chin higher, and Will opened his eyes. It was time to begin. He rose slowly from his knees and drew near to the altar. Above him appeared the moon, illuminating him with bright clear radiance. He lay across the altar on his back and it soaked into his skin, until he glowed with it, reflecting back the Moon's borrowed light. A mirror of a mirror - the idea tickled him with laughter and the Temple echoed with the sound. He raised a hand towards the light above him, reaching towards it, thinking how right that it should be so.

Then he became conscious of figures nearby, just out of sight. One was the Father - his voice rang out forcefully, leading the others in prayer. Will lay back, half-listening, feeling as if he floated unsupported even as the hard stone surface of the altar pressed through the silk underneath him. Soon, the figures moved closer, a crowd of anonymous bodies which held respectfully back as the Father came to stand by Will's feet. All except the Father were obscured with a dark haze - Will could not seem to focus upon them or their faces. But it did not matter, as the Father's expression was warm and proud. Under it, Will was content.

But then, to Will's surprise, the Seer materialised beside the Father. He smiled down at Will, with an expression softer than any he had before seen. His skin was golden, and his hair glinted warmly with silver. It was as if the sun itself had come down from heaven to pay its respects. Will reached for him and he came, leaving the Father's side to take Will's hand. His other he laid on Will's cheek, and Will shut his eyes in bliss. He would understand, now - Will's purpose would be made clear to him. They could be at ease, finally.

His hand was released and the Seer drew deliberate fingers down along Will's chest instead, over his pale shining scars, made ghostly with moonlight. Left in their wake was a trail of burning heat, like a brand. Will shivered with it; his eyes were caught by the noble lines of the Seer's face, and he followed them with his fingers. He had never touched the Seer, and had not realised how greedy he was for the knowledge he could now freely take. The tips of his fingers traced a path along the high ridges of his brow, his cheekbones, and finally over his lips. Their wet heat under his fingertips was stirring, it made Will's breath catch in his throat.

Around them both, the shadows lengthened as if the sun had begun to dip and recede. Inky black gathered around the Seer, as he showed his other face, a soft and velvety darkness Will wanted to sink into. It grew, and enveloped Will also, until the only light was the moonlight radiating from his own body. It danced and glimmered over the Seer's skin like reflections from water. From the darkness emerged the figures, the faceless shadow men who had kept their distance until now. They reached for Will with many hands, stroking and gliding across his skin, igniting it with sensation. The Seer watched him with night-dark eyes while Will abandoned himself to their myriad touches. But his gaze remained fixed to the Seer's and his fingers pressed to the Seer's lips.

A firm, warm hand on Will's arm drew his attention. Will blinked once - it was the Father, whom he had almost forgotten. But the sight of him flooded Will with pleasure, as well as a desire to please. Here was Will's surety, someone who had protected and looked after him.

He must be thanked for his care; Will would show him his appreciation. His arm moved clumsily - his limbs had grown heavy and it took a few seconds to make it obey his command. The Father caught his hand as it wavered toward him and enveloped it within his own. He smiled down at Will, a small and private moment. Then the Father turned to the figures, and began to speak.

Will could not make out what was said - his lips seemed to move in slow motion and the sound they made was muffled. The effect was soporific, like being held underwater. He lay back uncaringly. The Seer remained by his side, stroking Will's hair, and they both watched as the Father held aloft a goblet. It was passed around the altar - each dark figure drank from it before handing it to the next, until it had reached all but the Seer. When it returned back to the Father's hands, he raised it to his mouth and drained it entirely.

There was a moment of expectancy and everything stilled into a tableau. At his feet, the Father turned to Will again, surrounded by the mass of cloaked figures. The moonlight picked out sharp contours and vivid details among the rich deep shadows. The fold of a robe, a clasp of a breastpin, the hilt of a knife. The Seer's fingers combing through Will's hair seemed to be the only thing which moved. Then, as one, they came towards Will.

Their touches were less tentative now, they moved with purpose and speed. Will was gripped by a sudden desperation, a need for heightened sensation which had lain latent but now burst into being. Hands groped over him, kneading and fondling, over his chest and stomach and limbs. He writhed and sighed, twisted into and away from them, until the Seer moved nearer and placed cupped Will's face. He pressed two fingers to Will's lips and without hesitation, Will slid them hungrily into his mouth. The pleasure of doing so was shocking - it stabbed low in his belly, sharp and pointed and delicious. Will sucked them deep, the roughness of his tongue slick over the Seer's skin calling to him with an animal instinct.

For a moment, the image of the Seer fractured and split, and behind it Will saw the creature of his dreams. It leaned over him and he stretched up to explore its branched antlers with trembling fingers. But they vanished before he could, and he became the familiar Seer once more. With wide eyes, Will recalled the time - maybe imagined or maybe not, he could not be sure - when he had licked the taste of his own release from the creature's fingers. He moaned around them, laving his tongue down them to their knuckles. With one hand, the Seer unbuckled his belt and Will's only thoughts were *at last* and *please*. But slowly he remembered the many bodies surrounding him, and of the Father at the other end of the altar.

Will froze, and looked towards him, seeking permission. The Father was stood back from the melee of grasping hands, watching and waiting. His words would not come to him and Will could only utter a pleading sound, but it caught the Father's attention. He nodded graciously at Will and indicated that the shadowy men should hold back their caresses for the moment. Will's answering smile was wide and grateful, as he scrabbled over onto his side. The Father watched with paternal approval, while Will's fingers stumbled to part the Seer's clothing, until his prick was freed. It was not yet fully hard, but hung thick and heavy and Will itched with a consuming want.

The Seer watched him gravely as he dipped his head, but Will could see the amusement hiding in his eyes. Without looking away from them, Will mouthed at him, slicking him wet

with his lips and tongue. He thickened and swelled quickly, and Will held back no more, taking his prick into his mouth and sucking with enthusiasm. Will's cheeks burned with desire; he felt hot all over, plagued with a prickling in his skin which drove him onwards. He pushed himself deeper, gagging a little on the Seer's length, but unable to stop from pressing for more. The Seer allowed him this, undemanding, simply skimming his fingers along Will's jaw and into his hair.

Will pulled back to wipe his mouth and smile up at him - needing the Seer to understand the things he wished to give - but his awareness was drawn elsewhere. There was a movement beside the Seer, and the Father's hand on Will's arm, and then in a flash Will realised what was asked of him and rejoiced at another chance to give pleasure. The Father's prick was soft still, and Will took up his task gleefully but with more restraint than he had shown the Seer. He began gently, almost teasingly, brushing his lips carefully over the head. He would strive to please and he would succeed.

The Father grew harder and Will grew bolder, until he was driving his mouth down deeply onto him. When the Father touched his face and grasped at his hair, Will moaned around his prick. He was held still while the Father thrust slowly between his lips. Will gasped for breath and let him. He rocked in and out of Will's mouth in a steady rhythm, punctuated only by the groans of the Father above. He shut his eyes and abandoned himself to its hypnotic effect, all his senses enveloped by the Father and entirely at his service.

But soon Will's pleasure was interrupted - the Father halted his smooth thrusts and pulled free of his mouth in one slow movement. But before he could mourn the loss, many pairs of hands were upon him again, this time pushing him over onto his stomach. They roamed down his back, between his thighs, and intruded slickly between his spread cheeks. Will gasped; his knees slid on the silk altar-covering as he sought to raise himself, but finding the purchase to do so was difficult. His prick dragged between his belly and its slippery surface, enough to make him moan softly but not enough to provide relief. He could only allow the probing explorations and wait for what would be his due.

The Father smoothed a stray curl back from his face before he moved away and out of view, leaving the Seer alone in front of him. Will stared up at him, writhing under the careless fingers which prepared him for the Father. The stretch of them was perfunctory, and a little rough, but it sparked heat along Will's spine and over his skin, making him bare his teeth and chase for more. Standing over him, the Seer watched, serene and unperturbed. He rubbed his thumb over Will's swollen lips and Will caught it briefly with his tongue. The Seer smiled and caressed Will's cheek, while the hands withdrew and raised him up onto his knees.

At the blunt press of the Father's prick, Will bore down on it with determination. His entrance was tight and the muscle there burned, but it was glorious. He felt so full, the Father touched him so deep inside, he could hardly move for how overwhelming it was - the steady, commanding presence of the Father, now so careful with him, like he was precious. Tears sprang to his eyes and ran down his cheeks - it was all so beautiful, for the Father to own him fully and for the Seer to see, and understand. Will looked into his face and found acceptance there, and unconcealed desire. Will nodded shakily and then the Seer's prick was once again before him, and he sank his mouth down onto it with an honest, needy desire of his own.

Will relented utterly and between them they found a slow and undulating rhythm to share him with. He was lost in a blissful kind of servitude, held in perfect balance by them both. The Father's hands held his hips with near-tenderness, every so often stroking up along his spine in silent praise. The Seer held his head upright, his finger cupped under his jaw and around the back of Will's neck, a gesture as protective as it was controlling. But their measured, deliberate thrusts did not last for long, as Will knew they would not. Without warning, the Father increased his pace, and it rapidly built into short, hard snaps of his hips, slapping deep into Will. His fingers dug into Will's hips, holding him in place. The Seer's prick slipped from Will's mouth and he let Will lean his forehead against the his hip, gasping into his skin. Will's own prick was still untouched when the Father groaned loudly, and drove deeply into him, jerking Will back hard against him.

The Father withdrew quickly and his release trickled down wet between Will's thighs, left trembled with effort. He was still kneeling, bent over, panting hard. The Seer guided his mouth back to his prick and Will obeyed gratefully - he felt empty, bereft, his body still humming with unspent need. But Will forgot his loss easily - this time the Seer was demanding of him, holding Will's hair and sliding deep inside his mouth. Will sucked him hard and met his eyes, imploring him silently to spend in his mouth. When he slipped free again, Will moaned with disappointment and a crushing feeling close to distress, but the Seer climbed upon the altar to sit back on his knees before Will.

Will was dumb with shock - what could he be thinking? Only the Vessel could be raised onto the altar, and not before he gained the blessing of the gods. He turned to look for the Father - he would know what to say to the Seer - but when he did, there was no one else there. They were entirely alone.

His skin prickled uncannily; something was wrong but he could not say what. A chill crept along him, as if an invisible door had opened or closed. It didn't make any sense - the Father could not have left them. Something caught in Will's mind, like a memory trying to re-surface. It fluttered and struggled, but nothing came from it - only a blank stillness.

The Seer, however, seemed not to notice anything was amiss. He reached underneath Will to stroke his prick and Will's confusion flew from his mind. His moan burst out of him loudly, and he fleetingly wondered if the Father would hear and come back to find out who touched the Vessel and caused him such gratification. But there was nothing but silence around them, and the Seer did it again, and then beckoned for Will to come to him - to seat himself on his prick and pleasure himself that way. Will's pulse pounded in his ears, his face hot with the knowledge that this was wrong. He should not do this, and especially not here, atop the altar. Yet his aching legs were moving underneath him, and then he was sinking down into the Seer's lap, clutching at the Seer's shoulders, shaking with want. They groaned together as he entered Will, the thick slide of him easy, and Will found himself helpless to do anything other than work himself to a climax upon the Seer's prick.

Around him, the Seer's arms supported Will's frantic and desperate movements, and he looked up into his face with layered and blazing emotions Will couldn't name. His breath panted over Will's lips, his face was so near to Will's. His eyes were dark and hungry and in them Will could read much that he had only glimpsed before. Things which came to him now as he remembered seeing the hilt of a knife picked out in delicate silver moonlight - how easy

it would be to take it and use it, to feel how soft and defenceless a man's body might be. By his own hand blood would flow slick and scandalously hot. The knife would become slippery under his fingers but it would not keep him from his purpose. And afterwards, he could do what many had done before him - *had done to him* - wash his hands and leave it cleanly behind.

The Seer moved inside him insistently, lifting him with each movement of his hips, leaving Will gasping, panting, delirious with pleasure. He pressed his forehead to the Seer's and they moved together, all else forgotten. Will felt his tears rise again, but these were different - they came from a place of pleading and wanting, from somewhere raw and feral and desperate, something echoed in the Seer's own face. The Seer brushed parted lips over his own, and Will's heart stuttered with revelation. It was a sensation entirely new yet it made so much sense. His tears overflowed - the Seer wiped them from his cheek as he kissed Will deeper, his tongue curling along Will's. His hand strayed down from Will's face, to gently grasp his prick, and with astonishing force Will's climax overtook him. He spilled his release into the Seer's hand and, along with it, sounds of pure worship into the Seer's mouth.

Will collapsed against him, exhausted, shuddering through the last of his orgasm. He was held quietly for a moment then the Seer shifted them both to lay Will down onto the altar. He bent over Will with dark, desiring eyes and Will reached for him, pulling the Seer between his open thighs. When he pushed inside, Will cried out and urged him onwards. Suddenly it was paramount that the Seer should fill him with his release - finally he would be claimed and Will was ready to let him. He was beautiful, a terrible and dangerous force which had subsumed Will like a madness. He stared down at Will with pure veneration, until Will shook with a deep and nameless longing, which he tried to sate by clutching him tight and dragging his mouth against his own. It was not long before he wrapped Will in his arms and drove into him deeply, rushing to his climax, panting breathless against Will's neck.

Slowly, they both stilled to a comfortable repose. A bone-deep peace filled Will, even though he knew he should worry about what they had just done, and where they still lay. But the Seer held him close and he was warm, and it seemed like together they could do anything they wished. Will's eyes fluttered closed and he fell asleep with his head pillowed on the Seer's chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

> This should be the second-to-last update - the final two chapters plus epilogue I will post all in one go - eeekk! I think it's too optimistic to hope they'll be ready by next weekend, so it will probably be the weekend after that. Thanks to everyone who has read, left kudos, commented so far <3
>
> Special thanks to em_c_writes for the really excellent speed-beta of this chapter, she made it much better :)

Rising from a deep sleep, Will stretched. He groaned at the sensation, how stiff and aching his limbs were. The thought dragged him reluctantly to full consciousness and he opened his eyes.

The Seer sat by his bed, at his customary post on the chair. Will blinked, confused. His head hurt.

“Are you keeping watch?” he yawned, turning onto his side to glare at him. “Do I need more of your supervision?”

The Seer uncrossed his legs. “I am here to make sure the effects of the elixir do not linger.”

Something tugged at Will’s mind, and as he sat up he became aware of other aches in his body, ones more personal than those in his limbs. But that was nothing unusual - it had been the God’s day yesterday, after all.

Then a memory hit him like a falling tree, and another and another, until he stood unsheltered among wide and open horizons. All ahead and behind him was clear, and at his feet lay the deeds of the day before. He could remember the Father’s hands upon him, and how eager he had been to pleasure him. And the faceless, anonymous men - surely the Priests; how they had prepared him, opened him up. Every detail of how the Vessel had served the Temple and the gods. His hands, his mouth, his body. It was all wrong - it was knowledge he should not have. He was supposed to be absent, it was not *him* whom it happened to. He was a channel for their worship - a vessel, only, and nothing more.

He knew, of course, the role his body played. Each time he awoke sore and with the sense of a sated excess of yearning. Sometimes impressions lingered of hands upon him, or a coiling warmth low in his belly. But never before had he woken the next day and remembered each moment; the memories of others using him were crystal sharp, like thorns trapped under his skin.

Next to his bed, the Seer was very still, like he was waiting for something. An icy knot gripped Will's heart. His hand, when he raised it to point at the Seer, was shaking.

"*You,"* he said, and to his shame his throat was thick with tears. "How can you have been there? The Father should not have allowed it to happen. It was not meant for you, none of it."

The Seer frowned. "I was not there, I was in my rooms. What was it you saw, Will?"

"You were there, you-" Will said, and then stopped and hid his face. It was too much - the memory of the things he had done with the Seer. How he had given of himself and how much he had wanted it. How it had felt to be held and kissed and worshipped in return.

He hunched around himself and tried to quieten his mind. In the memories which flooded him, he had been uncaring, blissfully so, fixated only upon his own pleasure, his own joy. But the Seer had known he was not himself, and had used that to his advantage. And in doing, something had been taken from Will which he hadn't even known he possessed. Though the devotion the Seer had shown him must now be considered a lie, the sensation of the Seer's lips against his remained vivid. He pressed a hand to his mouth and swallowed down a sob.

From beyond his window came voices, ones raised in celebration. There would be a feast tonight in which everyone would join - even the slaves. There would be happiness and blessings, and much rejoicing. Everyone gained, and only Will was diminished.

"What do you believe happened?" asked the Seer, kneeling beside him. "What do you believe I did?"

Will shook his head - he could not raise it to look at him. The sense of loss was vast and unexpected - a great echoing cavern had opened up within, one destined to remain empty. Only fleetingly had he housed such forbidden hopes and desires, but now they had been torn away he was left stricken and piteous. He berated himself for it but perhaps this was just punishment for his waywardness. Even now, after all that the Seer had done, he still yearned for his touch.

He had been so stupid. He had not thought it possible for the Seer to hurt him this way. His tears came again and he let them wet the blanket covering his knees.

"Listen to me," the Seer said. His hand on Will's back was firm and soothing, and only caused his tears to flow more freely. "I was not there. It was the elixir."

"You *must* have been! Are you going to tell me the rest of it was a dream too?" Will snapped his head up from his knees, pushed to anger by the Seer's denials.

"I cannot tell you that. Though you are not surprised about anything else, so likely it was real yet filtered through your own distorted perception. But I will swear to you by my sister's name that I was not present." The Seer leaned closer and slid his hands up to Will's shoulders. "I told you once I would only have you willing, and I meant it."

Will was pierced with a treacherous hope. "It was so real, that part most of all. I can still feel where you touched me."

He realised too late that he had brought his fingers to his own lips, and given away his secret desires, his disgrace. The Seer pulled his hand away and replaced it with his own, his fingers gentle and exploring. Will shut his eyes and did not relent.

“You are a liar,” he whispered. “There is nothing about you I can trust.”

“You may trust me in this,” the Seer answered. “I would not stand to see such ignorant and ugly-spirited men have what they do not deserve. If I had been there, I would have gutted them from throat to navel.”

Behind his eyes, Will could see it in one violent, blood-soaked image. The drip of blood from the Seer’s hands, his black clothing darkened with it. The knife he had used was small, concealed in his boots - he had it with him always and it was kept sharp for this purpose. Around him were strewn the bodies of the Priests and the Father, some still struggling as life ebbed from them. From on top of the altar, Will took in every detail. Pooling blood glowed and the Seer’s silvered hair was haloed with candlelight. As he looked down at his victims, his chest heaved and his fingers were restless by his sides. Where usually he was calm and decisive, for once he had been moved to act through pure passion. He turned to meet Will’s eyes and Will knew what he said was true. His obsession would not have let those men walk free of the Temple.

“And yet you are happy enough to let them when you are not present,” Will said. “You do not care about me, you only think you do. You could have taken me away with you at any point and still could, but you won’t.”

“It is your battle, Will, not mine. You must find your own conclusion.”

“With your *guidance*, though,” Will scoffed. “I know what you want now, I saw it in my vision.”

“Your own mind was the author of the things you saw, not I.” The Seer gazed up into Will’s face. “What was it?”

Will shook his head. “Just a thought, a possibility. A very vivid one.”

The Seer waited, his head on one side like a wolf.

Will sighed out a long, shaky breath. He was so tired, and his head still hurt. “You were there, we were- They had left us alone. Both of us were on the altar - you seemed different, *revealed* to me. And that's when I remembered seeing a knife.”

“What did you do with it, Will? In your mind?”

“I…*used* it. There was blood, lots of it, spilling everywhere, all over me.”

“Whom did you use it on?”

“I don't know, any of them, anyone I wanted.” Will scrubbed at his face. His tears had dried, leaving his skin tight. “In my hand, it felt like… potential.”

*

In his bed still, Will stared upwards with unfocused eyes. The Seer had left him to eat and sleep, after he had told Will his recovery from the elixir may last longer than usual. The Father would be informed that he was not well enough to go about his usual duties and he could rest for the remainder of the day. But Will's sleep was fitful and he ended up lying useless in bed, waiting for the Seer's promised return.

No matter of what else he thought, it always came back to him. Everything had become imbued with his presence, imagined or not. When Will shut his eyes he saw again the way he had looked at Will as he moved inside him. When he opened them, the dense straw mattress underneath him and the blankets around him became his embrace. There was no escape.

He soon stopped trying, and instead sought to understand. In his mind he wandered the Seer's clearing. There the trees rose straight and true, like carved stone columns, up from the fresh spring grass. The glade was dotted with tiny delicate wildflowers, a promise of burgeoning life held within each leaf and petal. Overhead, the trees shook pale sunlight down onto the sweet-smelling ground. It was beautiful, a memory of nature cultivated by a precise and ordered mind.

But it was the stream which called to Will. In the Settlements, water was precious and carefully channelled towards its myriad uses. It was not allowed the luxury of a natural course, where it may be contaminated or wasted. Here it flowed lazily over rocks and pebbles, in little swirls and eddies. He had only seen it so in paintings. On either side of the clearing, the stream disappeared beyond the boundaries of the Seer's treasury, where the trees gathered thick and impassable. Will stood on its shallow bank, absorbed by its sounds and patterns.

It was the flow of life, and death, he understood - it brought and it took away. It was knowledge, beginnings and endings. Most of all, it was time itself, moving with direction and slow persistence through the clearing, a reminder of the inevitability of the past.

With a deliberateness Will could not miss, the boulder of the Seer's sorrow sat by the water's edge. The stream curved round it, never wetting its gritty surface. The Seer would not give this part of his self to the passing of time; he hoarded it like a jealous lover. It would remain forever at his core - a simultaneous presence and absence, dark and immovable.

Will came to the water's edge. His breath was held as he ran his hands over the boulder. He wanted more than anything to give it peace. He imagined a great stone heart, beating under his palms. But it was dead and cold, and the life he filled it with oozed back out, with blood so dark it was almost black. It welled up through its fine grit as if it was porous, spilling slowly through the grass at his feet. His hands became coated with thick and viscous blood, and he sighed, at a loss. There was nothing he could do.

He rinsed his hands clean in the stream, and as he stepped away, the blood halted. Soon, the last of it soaked into the ground and vanished. Resigned, he sat and leant back against the boulder, watching the water trickle by.

Presently, the Seer joined him. He too sat by the stream, but without once glancing at the boulder at Will's back.

"You made sure I would remember," Will said. "You did something to the elixir."

"I simply left out a very important ingredient," the Seer replied. "They do not want you to remember. They think if you do you may wake up the next day with a very different perspective on your contribution. Are they right?"

"The others drank something too. Do they recall the rites?"

"Of course. How can they perform them correctly if they do not?"

Will nodded, unsurprised. "And all I am required to do is be willing to lie on the altar."

"Do you feel holy now, Will?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Will looked at the Seer. "There was a moment when I did," he said. "But it turns out it never really happened."

"None of this is real," the Seer said, looking around them. "Does that mean it does not have consequences beyond the boundaries of the mind?"

Will snorted, and turned away. "Every second I spend here, I am bound closer to you. It's what you wanted from the start."

"And yet still you came," the Seer said, smiling with a certainty which was hard to ignore. "Why do you think you imagined me at the rites?"

"For the same reason you showed me this place," Will said, returning his smile.

There they sat for some time, silent and at peace in each other's company. Will could get no further in his imaginings and nor did he want to.

*

By the time the Seer returned to his cell, Will had recovered most of his composure. Sitting by the stream had soothed him far more than he had expected and he had come to understand much in a short time. Most of all, he saw the Seer more clearly, and was certain he had not lied about the rites. But Will also understood that made the Seer no less wicked.

And how wicked he was. A man who had placed himself beyond good and evil, whose every action was based upon the darkness stoked within his own soul. One who exhorted Will to free himself through passion, of blood and death, and cared not for the suffering he caused, even to the object of his own desire. Will saw that in his eyes, pain made Will burn truer and brighter. To him, he was beautiful. The truth of the Seer, and his elegant machinations, was almost too much to grasp.

Will smiled to see the Seer enter his cell with veiled caution. It had been a scant couple of hours since he left Will to rest, but evidently did not quite know how he would find Will upon

his return. He did not sit immediately, and instead studied Will with some care.

“You look more rested,” he said, after a few moments. “Have you thought some more on our conversation?”

“I think of our conversation so much I no longer need you here in person to take part in it,” Will said, sitting up. “Will you swear on your sister’s name as you said?”

The Seer sat on the end of the bed, by Will’s feet. “If you need me to, then yes.”

“I know it's the truth you were not there. But I still want to hear you say it.”

“Then I will,” the Seer replied. “I swear by Mischa I was not present at the rites yesterday. Is that better?”

Mischa, Will thought. He wondered if the Seer knew how well Will understood what a gift her name was. Later he would visit the clearing again, and make a garden around the boulder. He would surround it with life, the most beautiful and delicate flowers he knew of. And he would place the first of his own memories there too - the firefly lights from the Seer’s lantern. It may only have been conjured by his mind but it had been a simple, uncomplicated moment of happiness, the first in a long time.

“Thank you,” Will said. “What is your name? Would you tell me it?”

The Seer gave him a wide and genuine smile, and covered Will's hand with his own. “My name is Hannibal,” he said. “And it would please me greatly if you were to use it.”

Will looked at their hands upon the blanket. Hannibal’s was large, bronzed and roughened by the sun. The false memory of them upon him was still so insistent - cupping his cheek, brushing the scars on his chest, firm on his hips. He turned his hand beneath Hannibal’s, to slide their palms together. It was warm and welcoming, and the swell of happiness in his chest was irresistible.

“Very well, when we are alone together you shall be Hannibal.” Will tugged their joined hands. “Come sit by me. There’s nowhere for either of us to hide now - let us not pretend anymore.”

Hannibal hesitated. A careful blankness eclipsed his expression, obscuring much of what he struggled with underneath. Will laced their fingers together and held on tightly, waiting.

“Would you deny me now, Hannibal?” Will said. “After all you have sought?”

With a curious look at Will, he stood gracefully and did as he was bid, settling down on the narrow bed and pulling Will against his chest. Will rested his head on his shoulder, and breathed deeper. The peace he had felt by the stream crept up on him again; a peace borne of following the current wherever it wished to go.

“If you were not there yesterday,” Will said, “maybe there was someone else in the place I thought was yours. If so, something that was meant only for you has been taken by another.”

He sighed, and gently brushed his lips over Hannibal's neck. "It would be another thing stolen from me that I cannot get back."

Around him, Hannibal's arms tightened. "Tell me about these conversations you've been having without me," Hannibal said. "You seem to have bounded forward on your own and I have some distance to make up."

Will smiled and shifted in his arms. "I went to your clearing and talked to you there. There are things I understand now which I did not before."

"Such as?"

"That you would not have shown it to me if you did not think me worthy. It is your most private refuge. No one else has been there, but I can inhabit it with you. I don't think even you realised that until now."

Something stilled in Hannibal's face so utterly it was as if he'd been turned to stone. Will carried on regardless.

"You want me there," he said. "But you need me to choose it, to choose you. That is why you have not taken me away. *You would only have me willing* you said, only you did not know the full meaning of your words. This was never your plan - it is something fate has dealt you the same as it has me."

"And will you?" Hannibal asked, his voice hoarse and heavy.

"I cannot answer yet," Will said. "I have only just come to realise this myself. Though I know I should not, I want to say yes."

"Then that must satisfy me for the present," Hannibal said. "But it will not stay me for long."

"I want more answers first," Will said. "I want you to tell me the truth, all of it. I want to know what you intended when you came here. I want to know what awaits me if I leave with you."

"Only what I have already told you. To wake you to your chains and aid you in throwing them off. The men who took us were not blind to their sins - they know what they did. And they believe they can assimilate us into their worlds, and take from us all over again. Our pasts, and our memories." Hannibal paused, and released Will from his embrace so he could look into his eyes. "But they did not reckon on what they invited in when they took me."

"And what if I come with you? What then?"

"You would do better to worry about what awaits you if you stay. How many months is it until you come of age and cease to be the Vessel?"

"Three," Will said.

"The world you live in is too forgetful. Its complacency will be its downfall, one way or another," Hannibal said. "Do you want to save yourself and hasten it along? Or will you stay,

and trust in the Father to protect you?"

Will felt the truth at the core of Hannibal's words. Though he wanted to lead him still along a path to darkness, Will knew he must face that exact choice very soon. And he wanted it to be a choice - one of his own making, maybe the first he could remember.

Since awakening that morning, he had spared few of his thoughts for the Father. There had been so many other things which claimed his attention, but now he considered what had passed between them.

"Before the God's day, I offered myself to the Father," Will said. "He does not use me that way - did you know that? I thought if he knew I was willing… But he was shocked. He told me never to mention it again, like it sickened him. Yet at the rites he did not hesitate. Why would that be so?"

Hannibal listened stoically but Will smiled to see the twitch of tension in his jaw. Now he could place his lips there and kiss it away, if he chose.

"He is ashamed," Hannibal replied, tersely. "Not of you, but of himself. He knows he does you wrong, deep down. The rites are his duty but in them he must use your body."

That the Father might be ashamed of his own conduct had not occurred to Will. He had been taught well the importance all the rituals he partook in and had never once felt shame over the uses his body was put to. The gods wanted it to be so, did they not? But then, the gods also had wanted Will to be taken from his family and placed in a strange land where he must learn a new language and new customs. They had wanted his freedom and they had taken it. He might serve the gods but it seemed they did not serve him in kind.

"Partly it is why he is so invested in the idea of your future," Hannibal continued, watching the workings of Will's mind. "He wishes to atone for his sins."

Will thought of all the Father had promised him. That he would leave the Settlement on coming of age and be granted his freedom, with land of his own. Will had always pictured this as somewhere secluded, where he could live quietly and honestly with only plants and animals for company. But he recalled now the Father had not provided any information beyond his sparse words and the details were all of Will's own imaginings. Maybe his future if he stayed would not be as he had supposed. He had so little understanding of the world beyond the Walls it was hard to see what the alternative might be.

"If I stayed, and won my freedom in three month's time," Will said. "Would you come to find me? All you would have to do is wait."

"I would try," Hannibal said. "It may be harder than you think. But I would seek you without end."

"But wouldn't the Father simply tell you where to look?"

"The Father cares for you, Will. But he can be forgetful too. When the time comes, he will make a choice, one he believes he must make. It will not be easy for him but he will not

choose you. Do you understand?"

"No," Will said. "I do not. Why can you not just tell me?"

"He governs and maintains a wider community, a wider peace. For that he needs a Vessel. Soon he will have a new one and you will no longer be under his protection. He cannot continue to care for you without disrupting the order he is sworn to keep. Instead, he has tried to prepare you for what is to come, in the hope it will be enough."

"What is to come?" Will asked, a dread building within him. "Tell me, help me understand."

"You can change what is to come - you can leave of your own accord."

Will huffed in frustration. "You speak in riddles. Either tell me or do not tell me, it is up to you."

"Did you know the Father had written to me of you? You are the reason I came here. He told of how you were the best Vessel he'd ever known. So intelligent and imaginative, so receptive to suffering, and yet so obedient and lamblike. So very willing to hand yourself over to your fate. A perfect sacrifice."

Will frowned. "The Vessel is not a sacrifice. I don't understand."

"The Father does not think so either," Hannibal said. "But I wonder what the previous Vessels might say if we could ask them." He sighed, and took Will's hand. "You would not listen to me if I told you, even now. It would be better for him to tell you himself."

"If you will not tell me, why would he?"

"There is a room, under the Temple. In it you will find more questions, not answers. But if you tell the Father what you have seen he may be more forthcoming with his explanations."

Chapter 11

Will had kept to his cell all day and seen no one but Hannibal. He trusted that, as the Father had sent no one looking for him, Hannibal had relayed the news that Will was not well enough for his duties today. It was an unusual event for Will to miss even an hour of work but the Father would accept Hannibal's explanations, whatever they were. He trusted him and had no reason to suspect any ulterior motives. If he had, Will would not be in the position he now found himself.

Now alone, Will waited for night to fall. As well as darkness, he needed that hour when the Temple Quarters grew quiet and all had settled in to the privacy of their rooms. His mind was set. He planned to look for the room Hannibal had told him of; hidden under the Temple - the key to the answers he sought.

He had weighed this course of action carefully. As far as he could understand, there were two possible reasons Hannibal would not simply say what awaited him in three months' time - either he would gain more from Will discovering the truth himself or it was to place Will there for another reason entirely. Both were manipulations and both were selfishly motivated. Though Will trusted in Hannibal's desire for him, it was not a reason to blindly trust everything else.

What had decided Will was the growing conviction he could not stay at the Temple, whether he left with Hannibal or not. Even if he chose to wait the three months until he came of age, could he remain wilfully ignorant for that long? It was not in his nature; not when everything he had known was in doubt and he had been told where to look for answers. The only possible way he could remain was by understanding what he had chosen. His faith in the Temple had weakened so much and he could no longer be sure who or what he served. To find that out was the only way he could tolerate continuing as he had done.

Already, the Sufferance approached again. Tomorrow he would be expected to kneel upon the dais and perform his weekly miracle for the congregation. So much had come unravelled since the last, only seven short days ago. But it would be a mockery of everything which he had before done. Instead of the suffering of others, he would think only of his own - wondering if his captor watched him, aware of his culpability. Maybe he never thought of Will at all, and did not relive that moment of shared violence as Will did in his dreams. His memory of it was blurry, and the few details he had he suspected of being later embellishments - a buckle lying in wet grass, torn free of someone's clothing; a woman in the distance, crouched in despair; voices raised in anger and then in pain. Of the men who took him and the journey to the Settlement, he remembered nothing at all. So it would not be surprising if the one who lived alongside him remembered even less. Will thought he might like to remind him, if the opportunity ever arose.

Outside, the God's day celebrations continued, and through his window drifted voices raised in song and shouts of laughter. The evening had started to draw in, lanterns and bonfires had been lit. They would burn into the night, and around them people would dance and make merry. Young lovers would pull each other close, with kisses and sweet words and smiles,

while their grandparents looked on indulgently. Would Hannibal mingle with the crowds outside? Was he there now, and did he drink and dance and smile, knowing Will lay alone in his cell, thinking of his approaching fate?

He had left Will soon after he had spoken of the room beneath the Temple. Will had half-hoped he would stay but was not ready to ask for such a thing. And he knew it was better he did not - it would have been too easy to pretend that, just for one night, Will could fall asleep in his arms and wake with a light and happy heart. If and when he chose him, he must do so with undeceived clarity; about whom he had chosen and what that said of Will. But even so, the room seemed cold and empty, and Will ached to very his bones with longing for him.

*

Hours later, when Will stepped outside into the corridor, the sounds of drunken revelry could still be faintly heard in the distance. By now, the other inhabitants of the Quarters would have eaten and drunk well, and Will hoped most might be insensible or asleep. He could pass off his presence in the Quarters, but once he entered the Temple it would be much more difficult to explain - the Vessel had no business there except in the company of the Father. He had left his lantern behind as without one he could move nimbly and conceal himself in shadows. He knew the Quarters intimately, but it meant he would have to find his way by the scant few torches which guttered along its dim passages. A dark cloak covered his bare limbs so that should anyone see him from a distance, they would not immediately know he was the Vessel.

There were two entrances to the Temple. The main one, used by worshippers, was outside and he judged it better to try for the Priests' door. It led straight from the Quarters themselves into the Temple, but to reach it he must pass by the Priests' apartments. Here was the greatest risk he had of being seen - if not by a Priest then by one of their slaves, who would be kept busy that night. When he reached the fork in the corridor, down which the Priests' apartments could be found, he paused and listened carefully. There was nothing to be heard but still he lingered. It would only take one door to open and he would be discovered. But as it was just as risky to wait in the open for too long, he steeled himself and quickly made his way along it. The Temple entrance was at the very end, and to his relief, he reached it with ease.

The door was old and worn, and its stone lintel above was sunken. Once it had been exposed to the elements but the Quarters had expanded and grown, until finally it been swallowed up entirely, sheltered from the outside world. Will wound his fingers through the thick iron ring which served as its handle. It was cool in his palm, worn smooth and shiny from frequent use. He took a deep breath and pulled. The hinges were well-oiled and the door opened without a sound.

Cautiously, he peered inside and satisfied himself he was alone. Around the walls, lanterns shone, hanging from brackets. He took one of them up as the door swung closed behind him. Then he stood, uncertain where to begin. He had been a frequent visitor to the Temple for years and, until today, had thought all of its secrets were already known to him. In front of him was the main hall where all the rites were performed. The walls and floors were all made of the same closely-fitted stones, and there were no suggestive gaps between them. It was simple and quite bare, with no decorations or carvings which could mask an entrance. Just a plain square-ish space, mostly taken up with rows of wooden benches and the dais at one end.

Will walked around the perimeter, feeling increasingly hopeless. Maybe the entrance was completely separate to the Temple. If so, it could be anywhere within the Quarters. Or even outside. He halted his aimless wandering by the dais, directly in front of the altar. Without the silk coverings, candlelight and elixir, it was made of blank, cold stone once more. He looked up, to where the moon-god canopy had been strung only yesterday. There was nothing between him and the empty, shadowed ceiling high above. The gods no longer looked down on him and he knew they would not again.

Upon the altar, he saw the two versions of himself which had existed side-by-side. One of them was happy, he smiled and laughed, but reached for a man who wasn't there. The other was a void, a space to be filled by others' demands. Both of them were a lie, and the Will who looked on and relived the night of the ceremony could not pretend to be either of them.

He knew then he would leave, and would do so with Hannibal. But he would choose to know the real Hannibal, rather than the one his mind had created in fantasy. The Hannibal who loved him, but not always to the benefit of Will. His love would be greedy, selfish, even malicious. And always would it be full of a despairing need which daunted even Hannibal. But Will wanted it and knew already he returned it. He belonged to someone. He had given up enough but would not give up this.

He stepped onto the dais and placed his palm on the altar stone. It would be the last time he touched it, maybe his last time in the Temple. All his service had been in good faith and he wanted to leave in the same manner. Perhaps, when he spoke to the Father, he could make him understand some of what had passed, and hand his duties over with amity. The Father had his faults but had always been generous with Will. He was owed any honesty Will could give him.

Behind the altar, hidden behind plain white drapes, was the entrance to the offices used by the Priests. They were now the only place left to look, before his search would take him outside the Temple. He pushed the drapes aside and entered, finding them much as he remembered from his days as a Temple slave. They were a warren of little rooms, rather chaotically arranged, and he wandered through them, careful not to disturb anything. Some were storerooms for furniture, robes and altar coverings; some crammed with desks and books. Every spare corner of space was in use, either arranged orderly or piled up every which way with papers or candle stubs.

He'd almost made a circuit when a sound caused him to freeze. He strained his ears valiantly, but struggled to hear anything over the blood pounding in his veins. Then a voice sounded, much louder this time. It echoed - its owner must be in the Temple - but seemed to be coming closer and closer. Quickly, Will slipped into one of the more cluttered storerooms and clambered over a pile of broken chairs. He put his lantern out, covered himself with some dusty old robes and waited.

Presently he heard footsteps, slightly uneven ones and more than one set. Hopefully it would simply be a couple of Priests come to fetch something, and who would soon be on their way.

"I was working on it only yesterday," one of them said, as they passed by the storeroom doorway. "I think you will be interested to read it, it contains some very interesting theories."

“Why you must show me now, on this night, I do not know. We have far more entertaining things waiting for us.”

“Ah, yes, *but*-” the first voice said. “It concerns that very matter. The elevation of the soul via the corporeality of others. *Specific others.*”

“And specific pleasures, I imagine,” said the other. “Is this another one of your theories about the Vessel? I noticed you enjoying him very thoroughly after the main event.”

“It is all part of my research, you see. The different processes available to us for communion with the gods is a surprisingly under-studied area.”

“Get to the point,” said the second voice. He sounded bored now.

“He is special that one, the Father is quite correct,” the first voice insisted. “I had the most remarkable visions that night. Shame we will not have this Vessel for much longer.”

You are right about that, Will thought, with white-hot rage. That voice. His memory of the ceremony fractured, crumpling like cracked eggshells. Hannibal's hands became another's. His face, another's. Will knew that voice. An ugly reality had been wrenched free from his desires; it dangled in front of him, grotesque and hateful. He knew the one he had let take Hannibal's place, a Priest he had served many times before, and the same who had tried to undermine Will’s chances of becoming Vessel. Hannibal's threat to gut them all came rushing into his mind, except now it sounded like a promise. A hot thrill of satisfaction shuddered through him, and with it came the determination to not let the night end without finding what he’d come for.

The Priests soon passed by again, one now with a sheaf of papers under his arm. Their voices dissolved into echoes as they crossed the Temple, and presently all returned to a still quiet.

Will struggled to free himself from the robes. It was very dark with the lantern out and he would need a clear space to relight it from his tinderbox. Shelving stood behind him and he used it to pull himself to his feet, but it was unsteady and something fell from it. Whatever it was smashed with the splintered chimes of breaking glass. He stilled for a moment, cursing silently. Not only might the sound attract unwanted attention but he wore only flimsy sandals and it would be easy to cut himself. He heard liquid also, sloshing over the floor.

With care, he picked up the lantern and made his way closer to the door, where the floor was clear. In a short time the lantern was burning again, casting a bright glow over the room. His sandals were spotted with something black - he must have knocked over a bottle of ink. Sure enough, when he held the lantern up, the remains of one lay under the shelving. But he noticed something strange - it had spilled and stained the stone floor but there was no puddle of ink left behind. Peering underneath the shelves to find where it had gone, he heard something promising - an occasional, faint drip. There must be a gap between the floor and the wall above it. Instantly, he realised what it meant and gave out a gasp. There was a door behind the shelving.

It took him some minutes to clear the shelves, which were weighed down with rows of bottles, boxes of yellowed paper, and moth-eaten rags. He was hot and sweaty before he’d

finished but with the shelves empty, the door they concealed was obvious. It was small and battered-looking, set flush into the wall. He couldn't imagine what lay behind it, but he couldn't leave without finding out. He pulled the rickety shelves aside without too much trouble. The door had an iron ring as a handle but there was no lock. He both pulled and pushed at the ring without success, before he tried to turn it instead. The mechanism was stiff and could not have been used for some time, but it gave slowly. With a only little force, the door creaked open.

Immediately a stale, damp air rushed out to meet him, making him shiver. Beyond the door was a dark so solid it was nearly tangible, and the beginning of some stone steps leading downwards. Ink had puddled on the uppermost one and had begun its slow dripping descent to wherever they led.

Will stood back for a moment, almost in disbelief. He had found it.

He pulled his cloak closer around him and picked up the lantern. Then he paused - the door was old and little-used, and might stick. The thought of becoming trapped behind it, even temporarily, was not one he welcomed. He dragged over a heavy box to act as a door stop, before he started down the stairs.

The air was chill and became more so the further down he went. The steps were stone, well-cut and evenly placed, but the journey downwards revealed no further clues to his destination. The flight of stairs ended in a short passageway. Will took a deep breath and walked along it slowly, holding the lantern aloft. In front of him was another door and carved into its wood was the Father's seal, much larger than the brass one he wore around his neck. This door was solid and imposing, and the carving skilled, but the wood was warped and peeling. On the floor the dust lay thick and undisturbed. No one had been down here for some time, maybe even years.

He touched the seal on the door, and in his other hand grasped the pendant. Briefly, he closed his eyes to ask for whatever protection it could still give him, before pushing the door open.

Behind it was a stone chamber, not much bigger than the storeroom above. The walls were so thick they seemed to be carved out of solid rock. Inset into them, in neat lines, were a series of discrete shallow alcoves. Each contained a small tumble of bones, topped with a skull.

A genuine and terrible horror slid down Will's spine. This was not the way of things - the dead were cremated and buried in earthen pots. They slowly returned to the soil, rejoining their kin, becoming once more part of a greater whole. Will clutched the lantern closer and made himself move further inside. Who could these people have been? It seemed like a punishment to be kept under the Temple, entirely separate from the world and its elements.

Shivering, he circled the room and found only more recesses filled with bones. Each had a number scratched into the rock underneath and, beginning to the left of the door, counting upwards from '1'. Later there were unexplained gaps in the sequence, occurring in random increments with no obvious pattern. The very last occupied alcove was numbered '137' - after that they were unfilled. Will puzzled over the numbers for a few moments - it was better than lingering near the empty, waiting spaces. They struck a resounding fear in him which he didn't care to examine.

Finally, he turned back towards the stairs which would lead him away from this dreadful place. He could learn no more here but had seen enough to ask the Father what it meant. At the thought of the Father, he remembered the seal on the door. A chill crept over his skin again, bringing him out in goosebumps. It had been pushed from his mind by the array of the dead, and now he found he did not wish to discover its meaning while he stood in their midst. Their blank sockets seemed to reach out to him, and there was a feeling like a hidden door opening and something rushing in to fill the space.

In the corner of his vision sat something he had missed on entering the room. He wanted to turn away and calmly go upstairs without seeing it. Yet he must; though he feared to look more than anything, he was gripped with the conviction it was the reason Hannibal had sent him here. He made himself face it; a small huddled mass, about the size of well-grown child. The lantern-light revealed it to be a statue - a perfect counterpart to the one which stood in the Temple's private garden, except instead of a sundial it was crowned with a wide, shallow dish. In the stone chamber there was neither wind nor rain to blur its crisply-chiselled edges, and Will had no difficulties making out the chains which bound the supplicants' ankles to its base. They stood out in stark relief, and so too did The Vessel's Creed, sharply engraved around the basin.

My sufferance is borne for the good of all, and in this I willingly submit.

The lantern dropped from Will's slack fingers and, instantly, he was plunged into darkness.

Chapter 12

Blindly, Will scrambled through the door and down the passage to the stairs. He had to half-crawl up them, feeling the way with desperate hands, feet slipping underneath him. The storeroom was just ahead, the air was growing warmer, familiar, more alive. But below him he could feel the cold yawn of the open door, and beyond it the empty stare of the skulls. When he staggered into the storeroom and slammed the door shut, they were watching him still.

His head pounded, and his lungs seemed to want to expand out of his chest, up into his throat. He fell forward onto his hands and knees, panting and trembling, while his body rushed to catch up with his mind. Then he forced himself up and away, out of the room, driven to place more distance between himself and what he'd seen.

On shaking legs, he weaved through the maze of little rooms until the Temple opened in front of him. After all the darkness below, the light seemed soft, reassuring. But its comfort was superficial only. Will would find nothing of comfort in this place, ever again. He now understood why Hannibal had needed Will to see for himself the secrets it concealed. He had ensured Will would not be able to look back with lingering fondness, not even in feigned and self-deceiving nostalgia. He would have Will all to himself.

His legs threatened to buckle beneath him, and he stumbled to the nearest wooden bench and curled up on it. He stared absently at his hands and knees, blackened with grime from his escape, and rubbed at them with his cloak. It didn't have much effect. Without intention, his thoughts galloped onwards. He must leave as soon as possible, he realised, he couldn't spend even one more night here. He sagged against the back of the bench, letting his eyes twitch shut. The image came unheeded. Hannibal would be by his side, a steadying and possessive presence. With him, Will need never fear anything ever again. Except perhaps, Hannibal himself.

Will could find him now, they could leave immediately. But when he searched his heart, he knew he could not without speaking to the Father. If anything, it was even more necessary now. There was much he still did not have answers for. And his mind could barely settle on what he had seen long enough for him to examine it. There were only recurring glimpses, flashing in quick succession - the numbers beneath the bones, the shallow basin in place of the sundial. The Vessel's Creed. It was clear the Father had indeed lied to Will, but he must explain how deep his betrayal went.

*

This time he did not bother about concealment. Once he was sure his legs would support him, he strode straight to the Father's rooms, holding himself as proud as he could. The guards to the Father's apartments let him pass without comment, and he made it all the way to the door of his private rooms before he had to stop and collect himself again. Panic kept bubbling up into his throat and it took some effort to master it. He thought it might be fear of the unknown

- he would be easier once he faced something definite and real, rather than shadows on the wall.

He was about to knock for entry when the Father's voice sounded, very close to the door. Will shrunk back, half-expecting it to be flung open. But the door remained tightly shut, and the Father could still be heard speaking on the other side. His words were muffled and Will could not make them out, but from the listening pauses in his speech it seemed there was someone else in the room. Dismayed, Will put his ear to the door. He could not confront the Father if there was another person present. When the second voice replied, something of its quiet, assured tone caught his attention, and his breath caught, in both relief and apprehension. It was Hannibal.

For a paranoid moment, he imagined Hannibal conspiring against him and that all which had passed between them was a lie. The idea pained him far more than he'd expected - their intimacy was still tentative and mostly unexplored, but already he was mired so deeply in it. He reminded himself of Hannibal's promise, of Mischa. It was a vow that meant something, he knew it.

He listened carefully at the door. Their voices were level and unhurried, and Will told himself it was only to be expected. The Father thought Hannibal a friend and they likely spent hours in each other's company every week. But the sounds of their companionable evening was so at odds with the terrible, lonely abandonment of the room below the Temple. It brought to mind the suffering which others endured so that two men could sit up comfortably, talking late into the night. All the slaves in the fields and in the quarries, the women in the laundries and kitchens. All the lives given up to create an ease so familiar it went unnoticed. All forgotten, like the bones under the Temple.

His anger swelled out of nowhere, grief and shock transformed into something pure and decided. It pushed him straight through the door to burst directly into their midst.

Hannibal was sitting by the fire, his long legs crossed and a glass of sweet wine poised between finger and thumb. The Father had been slowly pacing the room, a habit Will recognised well. At Will's intrusion, both stilled completely and had their eyes fixed upon him. The Father's expression was divided between extreme displeasure at Will's rudeness and concern for how out of character it was. On any other occasion, Will would have faltered under it.

The Father spoke first. He must have decided Will had urgent news of some kind, for he only said, "Well, what is it?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hannibal lean forward, betraying his interest. With a sudden certainty, Will realised Hannibal had known Will would follow his advice tonight and had been waiting for exactly this. The thought gave him the courage he needed.

"I know your secret," Will said. The Father paled almost instantly at his words. "I found the ossuary."

The Father considered Will for a long tense moment, then seemed to shake himself free of something.

“I am very sorry for that,” he said. “I would not have chosen for you to stumble across it.”

“I want you to explain what it means,” Will said. “What I saw tonight does not tally with what I understand of you. I choose to believe there is more I do not know. I just want you to tell me what that is.”

“I would have preferred not to have had to, but I am willing to overlook exactly how you found it.” The Father studied him hard, and with something like regret. “It is not as you may think, Will - it is an old custom only. These are more enlightened times.”

Will was trembling again, but this time with quiet rage not fear. “I find a room full of bones and the Vessel’s Creed inscribed on a sacrificial dish, and your answer is only that it is an old custom?”

“An old and barbaric one, yes,” said the Father. He raised hand in appeal. “I understand you’re frightened, but there is no need to be, I promise.”

“I am not frightened,” Will spat. “I am angry. *You* are the one who misunderstands. How long have they been down there? How long has it been since anyone visited them? And how long would it have been, if I had not stumbled across them? Years? Or in three months’ time?”

He had moved deeper into the room without realising, closer and closer to the Father.

“Will,” the Father said, in a warning voice. “You know me better than that. Calm yourself, and I will do my best to explain.”

Will ignored him and crowded closer still. “How many Vessels have there been, Father?” he asked in a softer voice. “What number am I?”

“Take a seat, Will,” the Father said. “You must trust me and let me speak.”

“I am the 139th,” Will said. “You told me that at my Choosing. I saw the numbers down there, inscribed beneath each body - the greatest was 137.”

“Will,” the Father said again. “I know it is difficult but you must listen to me.”

The Father turned towards Hannibal for assistance, and Will made a split-second decision. He darted forward and grabbed the Father’s knife from his belt. It was heavy, its bone handle warm. It was the one used at the Sufferance and it knew him intimately.

“Now I will listen,” Will said, and waved it at the nearest chair. “But you will sit, not I.”

The Father looked utterly taken aback, and stared at Will with wide eyes. Will's cheeks grew hot and he felt guilt for things he hadn't even done. This had not been his intention; he had only wanted the truth. But on reflection, he should have expected the Father to try and explain away his fears. He was always just a slave, no matter how good, and his feelings could not be taken seriously. His obedience was more important than his peace of mind.

The Father sat as directed, with exaggerated calm. “You and I both know you don't mean this. Put the knife down and let us talk together.”

Will very nearly laughed. He gripped the knife hard, hoping to keep his hand from shaking. “Do you think I want to be here, doing this?” he said. “If the truth is so much better than what I suppose it to be, why haven't you told me already?”

Forgotten by them both, Hannibal had risen silently from his seat. Now he came forward to stand behind the Father. Breathlessly, Will wondered what he meant to do. Could this be where everything spun out of his control?

Hannibal met his eyes, waiting, as entranced by Will as Will was with him.

“All I want is for you to tell me the truth,” he whispered, needing Hannibal to hear his wishes. “Then let me go.”

The Father followed the direction of Will's gaze, and twisted around. Hannibal smiled in false sympathy and rested a hand upon the Father's shoulder.

“Tell the boy the truth, Jack,” he said. “It cannot not be avoided now, and it is better he hear it from you.”

“I will,” he said, looking straight at Will. “But I will not be threatened. Put the knife down.”

Will shook his head, but lowered it to show he meant no harm. “For all your regard for me, we are closer to equals while I hold it,” he said. “I have no other power.”

Hannibal made no further move, watching Will with rapt attention. Their eyes met again over the Father’s head and Will’s resolve nearly crumbled. Everything Hannibal wanted for him lay just below the surface, behind his eyes. It was almost too much for Will to comprehend. He saw what Hannibal would have him do - how the path to freedom lay before him, bloody and brutal. After that, there would be no other ties to bind him, only Hannibal.

Right then, all Will wanted was to turn away and disappear, leave everything far behind. He could not do what Hannibal wished. Hannibal would follow him, they would still be together, and Will would still learn the truth. Whatever it was, Will would believe what Hannibal told him now. And it maybe it wouldn't break his heart that way.

But then he wouldn’t understand the Father’s role - he needed to hear him speak of it. He needed to see his face.

The knife, held loosely in his hand, grew heavier. For a moment, he considered setting it down.

He was pulled violently from his thoughts as the Father made a lunge for the knife. Will startled back, knowing already he had reacted too late. The expected grab around his wrist did not come - instead there was only a strangled choke. Hannibal had wound his arm tight across the Father’s throat, and held him pinned back against the chair. The Father struggled for a few seconds before relenting, and Hannibal loosened his grip only enough to let him breathe again. Horrified realisation settled into the Father’s features and he looked at Will with disbelief tinged with fear.

“The two of you...” he wheezed. “How long?”

Will swallowed. He had no idea how to answer - what lay between them was so intricate, but would seem no more substantial than smoke to the Father. His eyes flicked towards Hannibal. He had moved so fast, remained so composed. How easy would it be for him to crush the air from the Father’s throat, or snap his neck with a simple twist?

Hannibal interrupted before Will could open his mouth. “You are still avoiding the issue, Jack. Tell him what he wishes to know - all of it. Or I will do it for you.” His voice was perfectly even, unclouded by emotion.

The Father sagged back into the chair. “Will?” he choked out, staring at him still.

Witnessing the Father’s helplessness, Will felt his own betrayal keenly. It seared across his conscience, a stripe of slashing pain. The Father had trusted him but somewhere, even before tonight, Will had ceased to return it. And instead Will had placed himself in the hands of a man who would not hesitate to strangle the life from an old friend if it suited him. He wished he could explain how it came to be, but the Father would never understand.

Instead, he smiled sadly. “You encouraged it, Father, do you not remember? Sharing with your friends what you were too ashamed to take for yourself. Though it is not your fault he is not what you supposed.” He looked at Hannibal. “Let him speak.”

Hannibal released his hold, but remained where he stood, and with his hands upon the Father’s shoulders. The warning was clear.

“You are making a mistake,” the Father said, rubbing his throat. “I would rather you gave me your anger than take whatever it is he offers. If you accept it, you cannot go back.”

“I do not want to go back,” Will answered. “I don't expect you to understand.”

The Father’s sorrow was so evident, Will had to look away. He knelt down in front of him, a respectful distance away.

“You have already lost me,” Will said. “Please tell me, Father. Let that be your parting gift. Tell me about the room under the Temple.”

The Father shook his head, but this time in resignation. He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. “A long time ago, our customs were different. The Vessel was a blood sacrifice, a young boy chosen for his beauty and innocence. Over the years, the Vessel’s role grew. The people would put their troubles to him, and at his death those troubles would be released along with his spirit.

“He spent longer and longer in the Temple, hearing the suffering of others, until that became the first duty of the Vessel. Now, you bleed for them but you do not die. The Vessel’s intercession is of the spirit, and that is better for us all.”

It was as he thought, then. Will wondered if they’d known what was going to happen to them, if they’d been frightened.

“Did it happen in that chamber?” he asked. “Or in the Temple?”

“The stone dish you saw used to stand in the Temple,” the Father said. “Or so the histories say.”

Will thought of the lonely little piles of bones. They were all that was left behind - so much unused human potential, given gladly to the gods. The rituals he performed were nothing but re-enactments of atrocities. He remembered the scars littering his chest and wrists.

“How did they die?” he asked. It mattered that he should know - the skulls no longer stared blankly after him. They implored, they needed him to recognise their fate.

“The rituals are not fully documented… but it seems that they were bled and then their hearts were cut out.”

Will nodded, and took a great gulping breath. His tears spilled over finally. Someone should weep for them, he thought. And who better than me.

“It was a long time ago,” the Father said. “Several generations have passed since then. The gods do not want you to die for them, Will, and neither do I.”

Will wiped his face with one hand. “I know you do not,” he said, when he could speak again. “That is what I do not understand - why is the 137th Vessel to be found there? I must have been here when he died. And where is the 138th - Daniel - the one who trained me? What would happen if I stayed to come of age?”

The Father hesitated. “This will be harder for you to understand, Will. You must believe me when I say I’ve done everything I could to protect you.”

Will bowed his head and waited. After everything, he was no longer sure he could stand to hear it.

“There can only be one Vessel - once the mantle is passed over to another, an ordinary life is not possible in the Settlement. The Vessel sees and hears too much, and in the minds of the community, would never cease to hold the title.”

“I always knew that,” Will said. “It's why you would send me away to live by myself.”

“But your covenant is with the gods, also. They cannot let you return to live an ordinary life either - you have touched them. Ultimately, your fate lies in their hands.” The Father let out a long, heavy breath. “In my tenure as Father, I have tried to do things a little differently. To give you the best chance.”

“*The best chance?*” Will said. “What do you mean?”

A long silence shrouded all three of them. Will could only hear his own pulse, fast but strong, beating with life.

The Father looked at the floor. “I always hoped that, somehow, this day would not come,” he said. “I've tried to do right by you, Will. But you have to understand my responsibilities. I

must abide by my duty to the community, and to the gods, above all else."

Will gripped the knife again, painfully hard, his knuckles white.

"If I had stayed," he said, his voice shaking. "What would have happened to me?"

The Father hesitated again. Hannibal's knuckles tightened on his shoulders, and the words fell reluctantly from him.

"Soon after your duties with the new Vessel were completed, a day would come when you would wake somewhere else," he said. "Somewhere far away, in the hills. Even I do not know where. There would be some food and clothing for you, but from there the gods would guide you to your fate."

The very same hills he'd been dreaming of, which had represented freedom and wide horizons. Even from a distance they'd appeared barren, lonely and wild. But to awake there completely alone, with the new understanding of his abandonment, his disposability. An outcast. With no clue as to which direction to turn next - and no going back, even if he wished it. And likely with a cold, miserable death to look forward to.

"How can this be true?" Will said. "Would you do something so cruel?"

The Father fixed him with a steady eye. "I have taught every Vessel all I could, enough for them to survive and live by. How to carve a place for themselves in the world. How to be of use to others, in case fortune took them back towards society."

Will broke out in involuntary laughter. It shook him to his core and left him out of breath.

"You realise, if they survived the first week, most would only be fit for a brothel? That is likely where your precious Vessels have ended up," he said. "Some fate the gods will have given them."

"I have done the best I can," the Father said. "It is the way it must be and I have to trust in the gods that what should be, comes to pass."

With horror, Will saw he believed it, and worse, would defend it. Even to Will.

His thoughts whirled without end; he was left speechless. Standing above the Father, Hannibal watched him still - silent, blank.

"Please understand, Will, I have no other choice."

A spark flared in Will's mind, bright and cold as the winter sun.

"How can you plead to a slave of having no choice?" Will said, in disbelief. "When I think of all the choices you have had which I have not… And what *has* come to pass? How did the Vessel who taught Daniel become entombed in the chamber?"

"That I am very sorry for," the Father said. "The hills are patrolled by soldiers. Soon after he was emancipated, they found a body. They brought him back here, so he could be laid to rest

with his spiritual kin."

"It is very easy indeed to regret the evidence in front of your eyes. Are you sorry for the others, whose fate you do not know?" Will retorted. "For all you are aware, he could have been one of the lucky ones."

"I have prepared you," the Father said, as firm and resolute as was in everything. "I have taught you all I could and asked others to do the same. I would not have had that be your fate."

"After all your words to me, all the hopes you encouraged me to have," Will said. None of it made sense. Hannibal had been right - the Father lied to himself as much as he did to Will. "Would killing me not be kinder?"

"The Vessel must devote his life to the Temple willingly," the Father explained. "The Sufferance could not be performed otherwise. And that is the sacrifice he must give."

"But my entire life has been a sacrifice!" Will burst out. "I was not born here, I was brought! Or did you forget that?!"

The Father shook his head, with genuine sadness. Some of his confidence seemed to desert him. "No, Will," he said quietly. "I could never forget that."

A cold seized Will's heart. He was drenched in it, flooded with understanding. He dragged himself up to his feet and stumbled backwards, until his back hit something solid. The wall. He let go of the knife and slid downwards, with his face in his hands. Hannibal's words echoed in his ears - *tell him all of it, or I will.*

"No," Will said. "No, no, no, please no." He brought his knees up, and hugged them to his chest. "Hannibal told me one of my captors lived here. It's you, isn't it? You took me."

When he looked up again it was the Father who could not meet his eyes. There was a terrible silence.

"I was not born into Temple life," the Father said, eventually. Each word was slow and heavy, like stones dropping into a deep still pool. "There was a time before, when I was a soldier."

Will realised he'd grasped his pendant. Its cool brass against his palm was usually a comfort, solid and reassuring. A sob clawed at his throat.

"But soon I knew I must find another calling," the Father said. "What was asked of me was… too much."

"And what did they ask?" Will said. "I remember hardly any of it, and nothing which came before. *You* took that from me."

The Father did not answer, he simply stared at his hands.

"Tell me what happened," Will went on. "*Why me?"*

“I am not proud of it,” the Father said. “The land you came from is not friendly to us - sometimes they take from us too. But our soldiers are more numerous and roam further afield. They spend many months abroad and it is expected they will not return empty-handed. One of the most valued commodities are young boys, who can be brought up to live as we do, and be useful in our Settlements.”

“And be sacrificed at your discretion,” Will said, disgust rising in his throat. “Go on - was I just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

“As soon as I saw you, I knew you were special. That you would do well with us - I think I saw you in the Temple even then,” the Father said. “We found you sitting in the dust outside a barn, feeding the chickens. You were not afraid, only curious. It was easy to take you, it was only afterwards, in the commotion of the raid, that you realised you were not going home.”

Will pulled the chain over his head and threw the pendant to the floor. His face was wet but he couldn’t remember when his tears had started again. The knife lay by his feet. He would take something from this place, he decided, and it would be this. Something he’d earned, *fought for*, not just accepted.

He folded his legs underneath himself and stood, tucking the knife into his belt.

“Do not do this, Will,” the Father said. “Please. I will let you go in peace. But think about who you hand yourself over to. Do either of us know him or what he is capable of?”

Will saw it then - the way Hannibal’s face hardened, how the flatness in his eyes somehow grew even more cold and dark. The creature of shadow lived just underneath the surface, tearing at the seams of his humanity. It was too easy to imagine antlers branching and claws ripping.

“I have seen what he is capable of,” Will said. “I know it intimately. He has shared his secrets with me.” He waited to feel something more, for it to strike him a final blow. But there was nothing. “How is the Physician, by the way?”

The Father looked pained, desperate. “It is my fault, you were right. I encouraged you together. I asked him to help you, after. But you can still choose differently.”

“The gods chose my fate early,” Will said. “It was written as soon as you sent me to him.”

“Will, please,” the Father begged.

He was exhausted, numb. But he was beyond the Father’s reach now. Will shook his head. “Goodbye, Father. There’s no other way for this to end.”

Hannibal had not moved, despite his obvious wish to act. He was waiting still. *You must find your own conclusion,* he had said, and he had meant it. Will turned to him.

“Let us go,” said Will. “Leave him be.”

Hannibal’s pause was as brief as the blink of an eye. A calculation made, options weighed and discarded. He nodded his assent.

“As you wish,” he said. “But we cannot simply leave him to raise the alarm.”

Will considered that. “Do whatever you need to,” he said, finally. “Just, do not hurt him - permanently.”

With shocking speed, Hannibal nodded once then swooped down behind the Father and locked his forearm tight against his throat. With his other hand, he covered his mouth and nose. It was methodical, devoid of emotion, and yet somehow still personal. An act of dominance which left Hannibal the victor.

It would have been easy to turn away from the sight, to pretend he had no part in it. But Will refused to lie and instead made himself a witness. He watched Hannibal’s callousness, the Father’s struggles. In less than a minute, the Father was unconscious.

“Take me somewhere far away,” Will said. “I don’t even want to sleep under the same stars.”

Chapter 13

For a few moments, Will stared down at the unconscious Father. His mouth was slack, his proud and sturdy carriage now slumped in the chair. Will was the cause of this, he felt its significance seeping deep within, wriggling into the spaces between his innards. Stretched between the past and the present was a gossamer-fine veil - if he struggled, he could still find his way back to who he had been before this moment. A part of him screamed and railed for him to *do something*, anything at all, but allow this to happen. But its noise was deadened and distant, hard to hear over his ringing rush of excitement.

One door had closed behind him, and he was yet to open a new one. Even his viscera thrilled with possibilities, with hope. It was all within his reach.

Hannibal approached him with unusual hesitancy. Will realised he'd been silent and unmoving for several minutes. He sought his gaze, leant into the hand which pressed against his cheek.

"You are certain of your choice?" Hannibal asked. His words had a softness, like he dared not hear the answer.

"Yes," Will said. "It is you."

Hannibal's thumb brushed over his skin. Will shut his eyes. It was maybe the most beautiful sensation he'd ever felt - no one had thought to touch him this way before. The warmth of Hannibal's body hovered just in front of him. His hands crept tentatively up Hannibal's chest, fingertips skimming the fine fabric of his shirt. It was loose and he curled his fingers into it, tighter and tighter, pulling him down, willing Hannibal's lips towards his own.

Hannibal dipped his head with a long and uneven sigh, but he folded his fingers over Will's and halted him. "If we are to go, it must be soon," he said. "Other people may have business with Father tonight. We cannot linger here."

Will released his shirt and stepped back, letting his warmth recede. He was right, they must leave. They would need to collect their things, maybe take some supplies from the kitchens. There were plans to be made. Will did not even know where they were going.

"Tell me what we must do," he said.

*

They left the Father's apartment, an acceptable distance apart. The guards stationed at its entrance bid Hannibal goodnight and Will had to remind himself there was nothing noteworthy about accompanying Hannibal back to his rooms. It was expected of him. Will kept his head bowed; body language which now felt alien. No one could look into his heart and see what he kept there.

Hannibal had insisted they stay together. It would arouse questions if he should be seen prepared for a journey, but if Will was caught it would cause instant uproar. The Vessel did not go travelling, under any circumstances.

“No one shall stop us,” he had promised Will. “I will not let them.”

It took only a few brief minutes for Hannibal to pack. He was a practiced traveller and his belongings were few. His clothes were finely made but practical - breeches of heavy cloth, several loose white shirts, a vest of well-stitched leather. His papers and writing materials he rolled up neatly and tied with a ribbon. Soon the room was bare and everything he owned was contained in a large leather knapsack.

“If you place your freedom above all else, my advice is to travel through life lightly,” he told Will. “It is not that I do not value luxury, but spartan autonomy is preferable to a comfortable prison. I will choose to leave it behind, every time, and gladly.”

His travelling clothes were dark and heavy. There were bands of thick leather across his chest and shoulders which, with his long wool cloak, made him seem bigger, broader. With the smears of black paint over his eyes Will wondered how anyone could have looked upon him and not seen him for what he was. Like an exiled warrior king, fierce and noble. A wolf among lambs.

“Now it is your turn,” Hannibal said.

They strode back along the corridors. Hannibal’s pace was steady and purposeful. Anyone who saw them now would have cause to wonder where they went and why. Will’s lungs seized in dread every time they rounded a corner. But the night had turned late and they met no one. They held a cautious silence, and Will had to wait until they entered his cell to speak of something which had worried him as he watched Hannibal pack.

“None of my clothes are practical,” he said. “I would freeze to death in one night.”

Hannibal scattered the contents of his cupboard onto the bed, and began to sort through them. All Will had to wear were tunics, and every single one left his arms and much of his legs bare. They would be fine for gentle walks under a hot sun but no good at all for sleeping out in the open, or for traversing exposed terrains.

“Your cloak is decent enough,” Hannibal said. “Wrap everything in your blankets and take it all. Either the cloth can be re-used or we can trade with them.” He looked at Will. “Until then, I will not let you freeze at night, do not worry.”

Will’s blush came as a surprise - he had not known he could still be coy about such matters. Hannibal smiled at him, wolfish but warm.

He looked at Will’s feet. “Your sandals concern me more,” he said, “Do you have nothing else?”

“No,” Will said. “Only these.”

Hannibal sighed. “Then we must make do. We will ride as much as possible, until you have some boots.”

Hannibal showed him how to wrap and tie his clothing in the blankets so he had a pouch which could be carried over his shoulder. In his hurried state, Will nearly forgot the meagre hoard of objects tucked into the mattress. Once he had considered discarding them, thinking them childish, but he wanted to leave nothing of himself behind. Though they belonged to his past, it might do him well to remember the necessity which had driven him to collect them.

Hannibal examined them thoughtfully, turning them over in his hands - the glass bead, the bird’s skull, the polished stone - and asked what they were.

“The only things which are truly mine,” Will answered. “Apart from this knife. I earned the right to carry it today.”

“You did,” Hannibal agreed, placing the little collection carefully into Will’s bundle of clothes. “And you have earned the right to wield it also.”

Will said nothing, but he heard his own words echo down to him from the past. Hanging from his belt, it felt like potential.

*

When they stepped into the night air outside the Quarters, something fell away from Will. He felt it leave, fluttering out raggedly behind him, just wisps dispersed by the gentle breeze.

“Has it always been this easy?” Will asked. “To simply put on a cloak and walk away into the dark night?”

“If it was, there would be no one left but a few Priests,” Hannibal said. “You find it easy now because you have seen things not meant for your eyes. You inhabit a different reality.” He turned his face to the sky, towards the moon. “And you are rising high on your triumphs. Tomorrow may be different - you may be cold or hungry, and you may be cursing me for taking you from your warm bed.”

“You did not take me,” Will said. “If you had, maybe I would have cursed you. But you waited for me to choose, and I have chosen you.”

Hannibal stepped out into the dark courtyard, avoiding Will’s eyes. His face was almost hidden in shadow.

“You do not believe me,” Will said, sensing his doubt. “You want to but you cannot.” Will took his hand. It was warm, and Hannibal’s fingers curled protectively around his own.

The moon was waning but still full and bright. The Temple loomed over them, casting a wall of solid darkness across their path. It pulled at Will’s mind. Until he stepped outside the Walls, he remained the Vessel, no matter what else had occurred. He could still act on behalf of those who had suffered.

“There is something I must do before I leave,” Will said. “In the Temple.”

“You are not easily predicted,” Hannibal said, with a smile in his voice. “I would not have expected you to want to enter that place again.” He considered the Temple’s bulk, even more imposing in the harsh moonlight. “It would be a risk. The Father may have already woken and alerted the guards.”

“I will be as quick as I can,” Will said. “But if they realise we are missing, no one will think to look for us there. And if even they do, they cannot stop me from leaving now.”

*

Will pushed the heavy doors open and Hannibal followed him inside. The Temple was the same as he had left it, barely a couple of hours ago. The lantern was still missing from the wall and had not been replaced. From that he inferred no one except the Father knew he’d been here.

His earlier fear had vanished. The room beneath his feet no longer held horrors, only terrible woes. He moved towards the dais and its altar with deliberate care, thinking of the stone dish and the Vessel’s sacrifice. Had he knelt on the same spot, where so many before him had been ripped open? The floor of the dais was smooth, blank as a clean page. It gave no indication where the dish had stood, no bloodstains blemished its stones.

Hannibal came to stand at his side. “They would not waste his blood like that,” he said, reading Will’s thoughts. “It was all collected, along with his heart.”

Will took a breath, and then another. Of course, the Vessel’s fluids were sacred. Will was surprised he hadn’t thought of it before. He wondered if the boy would have been conscious, aware of what was about to happen. Would he have felt pain? Or would he have been draped over the dish like meat, half-dead already, a dumb animal for the slaughter?

Hannibal watched his face calmly. “It would have been sipped, still warm. His heart would have crowned the feast afterwards. At its start, everyone would consume a small piece.” He looked down at the dais. “In their way, they honoured him. His sacrifice was taken seriously.”

“And you think mine is not?” Will said.

“Nor do you,” Hannibal said. “Not now. You would be used and replaced. Cast aside.”

Will dropped his bundle of clothing and unclasped his cloak. “Not anymore,” he said, setting the knife onto the altar and pulling his tunic over his head. “There is not much time. Keep talking, tell me their sorrows. Tell me yours.”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “You plan to perform the Sufferance?”

“Yes,” Will said. “A final one, for myself. For all the forgotten, for those whose suffering is deemed necessary for the comfort of others.” He hoisted himself to sit upon the altar, shivering at the cold stone under his bared skin. “Maybe the gods will hear me, and maybe they won’t. Either way, this will be my last act as the Vessel. Afterwards, I will simply be myself. Just an ordinary boy.”

Hannibal stepped between his legs, his hands already skating over Will's chest, up to cup his face.

"There is nothing ordinary about you," he said. "Even your beauty is singular. I confess, in truth I never sought your heart. And I never sought to give you mine."

"I know that," Will said. "Nor my body either. You only sought to make mischief with me, like the devil you are."

Hannibal smiled, as his fingers traced the edges of Will's face, his jaw, his hairline. Finally they tangled in his hair, and he brought his own close to Will's. "Let it be a sacrifice, then," he said. "Two hearts of equal worth and understanding, exchanged on an altar."

"Yes," Will said. "Yes."

He closed the gap between them, and pressed his lips softly to Hannibal's. They opened to him, easily. Will tentatively traced them with his tongue as Hannibal wrapped him in his arms, held him tightly. He grew bolder, exploring Hannibal's neck and jaw with his fingers, running them through his tied-back hair. When Hannibal deepened their kiss, Will found his tears came easily. He had never known the simple intimacy of a lover's kiss, what it was to give and receive more back in return.

All that had been stolen from him, until now. A heart of his own, to do with as he chose. And someone to accept it, who understood its worth. Whether in love or in friendship, it had been denied to him. And for so many others too. All the lives spent in toil, with no hope of rest, and all the lives cut short by carelessness or barbarity. Will allowed their voiceless sufferings to embody him and Hannibal kissed the tears from his skin.

When he could weep no more, Will wiped at his face and picked up the knife. "Here," he said, pushing its handle into Hannibal's hand. "It is the one which has bled me for years. Use it. Make me yours."

Hannibal looked down at their hands, at the knife Will had gifted him. Between his fingers it seemed sharper, more deadly. Will unfastened his leather cuffs and dropped them to the floor, baring his scars. Hannibal seemed frozen, staring at Will in wonder. Will took his hand and directed the blade so it lay flat against his chest.

"Put your mark on me," Will said. "It should forever be triumphant over the others I have been dealt."

Hannibal's fingers traced them, silvery pale lines which cross-hatched the skin over his heart. The most recent were pinker, darker. Will shivered under his touch, at the hunger beneath the surface.

"*Will*," Hannibal said, through clenched teeth. He looked pained, desperate.

In answer, Will pressed him with another kiss, and held his wrists out towards him. Hannibal withdrew the knife from his chest and wrapped his fingers gently around his arm. He held Will steady as a shallow wound was opened over each wrist. Fresh, dark blood beaded in a

glistening line. A few drops trickled free, down over the raised blue veins of Will's forearms. Hannibal caught each on his tongue, his eyes closed in blissful supplication. Will's breath caught in his chest at the sight, at the idea of being worshipped.

Hannibal was more composed, more determined when he drew the knife breadthways over Will's breast, crossing his heart. The cut was deeper, and it bled more freely, dripping sluggishly down Will's chest. It was much longer than the others - there would never be any doubt which was Hannibal's. Without the fever-potion, the pain of it was sharp, slicing cold over his skin before transforming into a stinging-hot ache.

Hannibal abandoned the knife to pull Will close. He bent to taste him again, gently at first then licking at Will's blood greedily, his tongue soothing and rough by turns. Will shuddered under his mouth and clutched at him, gasping. Hannibal's beard scratched his skin, his teeth nipped, his fingers dug into his hips. The rough cloth at Hannibal's stomach pressed against Will's growing hardness, and Will rubbed shamelessly up against him. The air between them was thick with scent - the iron richness of blood, the animal-warm leather, the fever of his own arousal. Will moaned and took Hannibal's head in his hands, kissing the smears of blood from his lips. The last shreds of Hannibal's reticence gave way and he surged over him, bending them both back over the altar. He ground his own hardness against Will's hip, and Will grasped for his belt, urging him on. He reached between them and freed Hannibal's prick, closing his fingers around its thickness. It was heated, heavy, like silk in his palm.

"Fetch oil," Will said. "I want what was taken from me. I want you."

Hannibal dragged his mouth away from Will's neck, up to kiss him roughly, then slid from the altar. From his knapsack he brought the medicine bag, and ripped it open. When he found what he sought, he returned to press a vial into Will's hand. Will uncorked it with his teeth and pooled the oil in his palm so Hannibal could coat his fingers. He leaned back on his elbows, the drying blood on his chest pulling tight at his skin, as Hannibal stroked lightly over Will's entrance. Will bit his lip as a finger breached him, and then another. There was every need to hurry but it was not that which drove Will past the point of comfort. That Hannibal did not have this knowledge of him already seemed impossible, it demanded immediate correction. He worked himself on Hannibal's fingers, then slicked his own with the rest of the oil. Reaching down, his hand joined Hannibal's between his legs. Hannibal groaned into Will's mouth, teeth bared and half-feral, as they opened Will up together.

Will watched his snarling, possessive need, enthralled. "What you said, about the men who touched me," he said. "How you'd gut them. I want to see you like that. If it is anything like this, you must be beautiful."

When Hannibal pushed inside him, it burned a little. He still felt sore, used, from the day before. *Good,* Will thought. *Let the only thing I feel be you.* His hands found Hannibal's arms, his shoulders, pulling him down, deeper. Their mouths met again, and Will moaned, arching back against him. Something shifted in Hannibal's face, the rawness of his want sharpening. He snapped his hips forward so Will had to fight to catch his breath.

"Yes, yes," Will panted, and lay back with his arms outstretched, gripping the sides of the altar.

Hannibal drove into him with tender, repeated violence and Will's chest began to bleed again. He smeared his fingers with blood and dragged them over Hannibal's lips, let Hannibal suck them clean. Will wrapped his legs tightly around him, seeking an ever-closer connection. In all his fantasies, unconscious or otherwise, he had never anticipated how beyond control their coupling would be. There was no room for any gods here, no space for religious devotion. Nothing now could come between them, their love would expand continuously, smothering everything else. He thought of the antlered creature he'd pictured, coolly intent on changing him, possessing him by default. This was nothing like that - it was pure madness, one shared equally, glorious in its victory over them both.

Will groaned and writhed beneath Hannibal's thrusts, his body singing with excruciating pleasure. He grabbed the back of Hannibal's neck and he bowed to him willingly. Their lips brushed with gentle tenderness, even as Hannibal's grip on his hips was punishing, his prick hard and unforgiving. Hannibal's hand closed over Will's hardness, his thumb rubbed the tip lightly, and with a cry Will found his release. It spurted over his stomach, over Hannibal's fingers. Hannibal shuddered inside him, burying his face in Will's neck, holding him close. When he pulled out, Will felt his release spill from him, onto the altar.

He sat up to see Hannibal kneel before him. His hands were gentle now, they traced his sides, the drying blood, down to the bruises on his hips. He dipped his head to swipe his tongue across the stripes of semen on Will's stomach, taking for himself what should belong to the gods. Will nodded shakily, granting his permission.

"Now I feel holy," Will said, smiling at the tranquility of Hannibal's expression. "You asked me if I did when we spoke in the clearing, after the God's day."

"Then I am glad I could give you what you deserve," Hannibal smiled back. "And I trust I will be present for more of our conversations in future."

"You will never be far away," Will agreed. "I think you believe me now."

He reached out to cup his cheek, a reciprocation of Hannibal's frequent gesture. A stillness surrounded them, though it would be brief. Any moment now, they must leave.

A gasped noise sounded, at the other end of the Temple. Reluctantly, they both turned towards it.

"What is the meaning of this?" The voice echoed, unpleasantly shrill, around the high solid walls.

Neither of them moved to hide themselves. Will stretched lazily. He would have known who it was without even seeing his face - he had heard enough of him for one night. Perhaps he should be afraid, or at least alarmed by their discovery, but instead he felt a sense of righteousness. The gods had delivered him something, it seemed. Maybe they had heard him after all.

The Priest strode nearer, mouth hanging open at the sight of them both. That he wanted to say more was obvious but he appeared to not know where to begin. Will smiled easily at him from atop the altar.

“We are conducting our own research,” Will said. “Into the different processes available to us for communion with the gods.” He tilted his head in mock deference at the Priest. “I heard it was a surprisingly under-studied area.”

The Priest simply stared back at him in shock. He barely spared Hannibal a glance, still knelt between Will’s legs. If he had, it might have warned him to retreat.

“Why don’t you join us?” Will said. “I haven’t had the pleasure of reading your manuscript, but I imagine you hypothesise that a greater number of participants is more effective. And other, similar, banalities.”

He turned to Hannibal, who looked back at him with open curiosity. Will said to him, “This gentleman was kind enough to keep me company after the ritual yesterday. Can you believe the elixir made me think he was you?”

Hannibal’s face darkened swiftly, but Will smoothed his hair back from his face soothingly, and with the other palmed the knife at their side. Understanding flickered in Hannibal’s eyes, quickly followed by adoration.

The Priest was rapidly getting over his shock. He took a step closer and an aborted jerk of his arm suggested he thought of dragging Will bodily from the altar. Before he could move, Will jumped down and came towards him. The moment the Priest saw the knife, he stilled and shut his mouth.

“Even when I was a mere Temple slave, you were keen to keep me to yourself,” Will said, standing before him. The Priest’s eyes were wide; slowly they took in his nakedness, smeared with the sticky remains of his own blood and release. “I remember your proclivities very well. And now I am the Vessel, you want to use my abilities too. You think they can elevate you.”

“How did you get that knife?” the Priest said. “Where is the Father? What have you done with him?”

“He is quite safe,” Will said. “It is not him you should worry about.”

The Priest took a faltering step back and Will took one forward. Behind the Priest, Hannibal stole around the perimeter of the Temple, unseen. Will understood that he meant to wait by the door, should the Priest bolt for escape.

“He never thinks of you, you know,” Will continued. “The Father has far more important demands on his time than to care about your misplaced ambition. What does it matter to him if you should have a little fun after the ritual? His authority is his own, it does not come from me or the gods. It is something he has earned and will carry with him, long after I am gone.”

Will took another step and the Priest slunk backwards again.

“It matters to me though,” Will said quietly, leaning forward. “And it matters to the man standing behind you.”

The Priest whipped round in shock. There was no one there.

“It is not him you should worry about, either,” Will laughed. “Or, at least not yet.”

For the first time, a shadow of annoyance crossed the Priest’s face and he squared his shoulders. Will paused, knowing he was close to his goal. He forced himself to relax his posture, holding the knife by his side. All he had to do was wait for the Priest to choose his own fate. Whatever it was, Will would deliver it.

“I’ve had enough of these games. The Father shall hear of this,” said the Priest, and he seized Will’s arm.

Instead of pulling away from his grip, Will leaned all his weight into it and twisted round. The Priest lost his hold, and frustrated, attempted to grab Will around the middle and tug him down to the floor. But he acted without forethought and his instincts were poor. One slash with the knife was enough to make the Priest yelp and release him. Will turned him to face him. Blood ran from a shallow cut on his forearm, and he cringed backwards.

It was enough for the decision to settle into Will’s mind. He darted forward and plunged the knife deep into the Priest’s stomach, up to the hilt. Blood flowed over his hand like silk, already soaking the Priest’s clothes. The Priest gasped, in agonised shock, and with his hands tried to clutch for the knife.

“I want you to know,” Will said, “that this was your choice.”

He twisted the knife, then pulled it free. The Priest staggered, but before he could fall Hannibal caught him under the arms.

“Over the altar,” Will said. “Let them have their sacrifice. I will no longer be it.”

Will watched Hannibal follow his direction, how easily he lifted the Priest onto it, and with what futility the Priest mutely implored Hannibal to help him, reaching for him, grasping at his clothes. Hannibal said nothing, only stood over him unblinkingly until he stilled. Whether he was dead or just unconscious Will didn’t know. He discovered it didn’t really matter which.

*

When they stepped out from the Temple’s shadow, Will could still feel Hannibal’s eyes upon him. They had cleaned themselves of the worst of the blood, and Hannibal had bandaged his chest and wrists, all the time gazing at Will with a new softness. Any trace of doubt over Will’s choice had been replaced with something which couldn’t yet be formed into words. It was enough, for now, just to look upon each other, and entwine their fingers together.

In front of them lay the gates to the Temple garden. Without speaking, they entered it and followed the path to the sundial. It was piled high with woven crowns of thyme, fresh from the God’s day festivities. Only this morning, they would have seemed grotesque - offerings to a power he didn’t possess. He felt differently now. He remembered how Hannibal had made one on his first day at the Temple, and how Will had secretly derided him for it.

He plucked one of the strands of thyme from the pile. “When you first came here, you came into this garden and left one of these. I was hidden under those vines - I did not want to speak to anyone, least of all another Seer.”

Hannibal smiled, and raised Will’s hand to his mouth to kiss it. “It is the herb of courage,” he said. “Given to knights and warriors. And also to the Vessel.”

“Yes,” Will said. “But what I don’t know is if these are meant to lend me courage or are a request to share in that which is already mine.”

“Both,” Hannibal said. “But I left mine here with a wish you would find your way to your potential.”

“Is it my potential I have found,” Will asked, “or yours?” He looked at the crown in his hand - the leaves were still springy and smelled of greenery. “Maybe it is the same thing now.”

Hannibal did not answer, but Will knew of what he was thinking. It was the same thing which had occurred to him on the altar - that their love was dangerous, not only for people other than themselves.

He settled the crown onto his head and they both turned to leave. “I will take this courage,” Will said. “I will need it.”

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun slanted through the little window, warming his legs under the blankets. It was higher than it should be - Will knew he should rise and get on with his chores. There was planting to be done, plenty of it, else they would not crop enough vegetables come autumn. But the bed was soft and comfortable, and through the window was a patch of chill blue, fringed with dark green pine needles. He had never seen such trees until Hannibal brought him to the mountains, a few months ago.

A door opened and shut quickly, letting in a draft of air as cold as a knife. The snow had recently melted, revealing a landscape of delicate greens, but the sun had not yet heated the land much above freezing. Will huddled under the blankets, laughing when Hannibal pressed his cold fingers to Will's cheek on his way to the fire.

"Are you going to lie abed all day like a kept boy?" Hannibal asked, smiling over his shoulder as he warmed his hands.

"I am here because I can be," Will retorted. "The goats were fed and milked at dawn, and you had eggs for breakfast because of me."

He shuffled over to make room for Hannibal under the blankets. His arms snaked around him, holding him tightly. Will put his head to his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart. Every morsel of it belonged to Will, and the joy this caused him seemed to increase daily. Soon he would get up, but first he would drift like this, with Hannibal's warmth alongside his own.

The clearing swam up easily into his mind. They inhabited it equally now, and Hannibal seemed to welcome Will's presence there as much as he did in his bed. Now that Hannibal had found someone to know him fully, there was no question of anything but becoming more and more bound to each other. Through the dark winter, when the wind had swirled the snow, piling it up against their door, they had spent long hours there together. Will felt almost as if he too had travelled through the places Hannibal described; as if Hannibal had stood beside him when he had tended cattle or performed the rites of the Temple.

They had made new memories together as well. Opposite Mischa's garden, on the other side of the stream, lay a great felled oak, wreathed in ivy and soaked in blood. The place which cemented their love, their joining. Will looked upon it, and smiled.

Hannibal appeared next to him, and took Will's hand in his own.

"I have thought about what you asked me," Will said. "About the future and what we might do with it."

Hannibal kissed Will's knuckles - beneath his whiskers, his skin was still cold. "And do you have an answer yet?"

"Yes," Will said. "And no. I still cannot see very far ahead, I am too caught up in what has just passed."

The sound of the stream seemed to grow louder, calling for Will's attention. He watched it flow by, steady in its indifference, without goodness or malice. Its gentle waters disturbed all, over time, eroding and shaping endlessly.

"Whatever you decide, we will do," Hannibal promised. In the bed, he curled closer around Will and brushed a kiss onto his hair. In the clearing, he stood at Will's back and enfolded him into his arms. "There is much of you I have not yet seen, because you have not seen it either. It will find its way out, as long as we are where you want to be."

"I want to see my home," Will said, and the stream quietened to a near-stillness. "Where I was taken from."

He turned to Hannibal, and opened his eyes. Hannibal lay against the pillows, his hair coming free from its tie. Will pulled it loose; it slipped through his fingers like rich silk.

"And maybe see if I still have family there," he said. "But I don't want them to know me. I am beyond their understanding now."

Hannibal's brow furrowed in interest. "And then?"

"Then I want to know more about the world," Will said. "There must be others like me, ones for whom it is not too late." He laughed at Hannibal's answering frown. "You know what I mean - I cannot go back. I am fit for no one but you."

"No one can," Hannibal said. "No matter how much they might want to."

Will wriggled closer and kissed him. "Do not sulk, I do not want to go back and nor do I want anyone but you."

Underneath him, Hannibal hummed his agreement and slid his hands up Will's back, below his nightshirt. His hands were not fully warmed but the goosebumps on Will's skin had other causes, ones which heated him deep inside.

"And what fate would you have befall these waifs and strays?"

Will smiled. "Maybe we could find them together. Maybe we can free them too."

Chapter End Notes

That is all! Thank you very much to all who read, left kudos and commented - this has been a huge and unexpected piece of writing, but one I'm very glad about :)))

End Notes

I'm on tumblr and twitter (and very occasionally on pillowfort and dreamwidth).

I also write my own fiction which you can learn more about here.

Works inspired by this one

Illustration for The Vessel by TheSeaVoices

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!